THE SINGING GOLD

DOROTHY COTTRELL

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THE SINGING GOLD

By Dorothy Cottrell

A three thousand-mile trek with twenty thousand sheep. Across the Australian plains, pattering hooves scatter a cloud of larks singing into the sunshine. And the cruel hawks follow the herd and prey upon the living, golden sparks of music. Around that theme Dorothy Cottrell has written her novel, a story of the epic contest between the patience and strength of man and the immense, indifferent cruelty of nature.

In announcing its serialization, the editors of the *Ladies' Home Journal* said: '"The Singing Gold" is a work of genius, as charming a story as we have ever been privileged to read.'

The SINGING GOLD

By DOROTHY COTTRELL

O.P.
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BY

DOROTHY COTTRELL

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To

My Sweet Aunt Lavinia

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THE SINGING GOLD

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PART ONE

THE SINGING GOLD

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

Of my Friend 'Captain Dashaway'

'Wee Dream-Child,' wrote my Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore on my eighth birthday, 'I am sending you two little French dolls, and a party dress with underthings to match.' (You see, Grandmother never said anything so unladylike as 'pants' or 'drawers.') It must also be admitted that Grandmother had never seen me. But all through her ordered and baby-sprinkled years of marriage she had dreamed of a girl-child, and, as she regretfully christened each little newcomer George or Alexander or Benjamin, she resolved that the next should be a beribbonable little maid ... and when it came it had always to be called Christopher or Clarence or James. This happened eleven times, and then even Grandmother lost hope. Perhaps remembering that array of rampantly masculine small boys, the old lady felt that she was entitled to something exceptional in the way of granddaughters; be this as it may, she was

unshakably convinced of my great physical beauty and maidenly disposition — convictions quite unshared by my immediate acquaintances. Her aristocratic, slightly tremulous letters usually began with 'My little Rose,' 'Tiny Flower,' or 'God's Little Gift to Grandmother,' and ended with the fervently expressed wish that she 'might have her darling with her.' The old lady never suspected this, but it is more than possible that the hand of the Great Protector, which she so royally believed to o'ershadow her along with the rest of the 'righteous,' was most clearly evidenced in the many thousand miles that separated her last years of peace from my first of adventure. For I was not the sort of little girl that harmonizes with highly polished old furniture, ornament-piled what-nots, and canaries in silk-shaded cages, in the possession of all of which Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore greatly rejoiced.

With trembling eagerness I unwrapped my birthday parcel, drew out the two tiny dolls, and a fluffy, wonderful, impossible, fairy dress, such as only very, very old ladies make for very little girls, a dress of lovely clouded blue, trimmed with baby rosebuds, and a delectably blue and frilly pair of the things about which Grandmother never talked. I always received one of these gift-dresses with a wild delight which lasted until my thin-lipped and rather froglike small face appeared above the lace or baby rosebuds; when doubt as-

sailed me. On this particular day I went to where my mother was setting the lunch table and holding up the blue glory I regarded it with wistful reverence.

'Mother, do you suppose that there really *are* little girls lovely and beautiful enough to wear dresses like this?'

My mother was a practical woman; nice questions of this sort usually left her unmoved.

'Of course there are, and you wear them yourself, Joan,' she said. 'Would you like to put that one on now?'

I hesitated. 'If *I* was a lovely dress with tiny roses all over me, and little pants to match with frills on them, I know I shouldn't like it.'

'What?' asked my mother; 'the rosebuds or pants to match?'

'No — being put on *me*,' I explained sadly. 'Perhaps they thought that a beautiful girl with long golden curls and blue eyes like stars . . .'

'Joan, you're upsetting the milk!'

'Why does something always upset just when you're saying something?'

'Most likely because you are *always* saying something,' said my mother, who unlike my father at times showed signs of exhaustion; *he* would wrestle with such problems by the hour. I regarded my mother with 'cold dignity' and dilated no more upon the type of being whom the dresses might have expected to apparel. In fact, 'still

wrapped in chilling reserve,' I left the room, as indignant, thin, active, and ugly a little girl as could have been found in the whole brilliant, sunflooded width of Queensland. Except on state occasions (my family perhaps feeling the futility of ornament) I was dressed like a boy, and my slim, trousered figure was usually crowned by an enormous, dirty, green-and-white sun-helmet, so that I presented the appearance of an animated but slightly *passé* mushroom.

Having raided the safe and stowed my new dolls, a bottle of milk, and a packet of lunch into a dirty little reed basket of my own weaving, I stole out among the giant pepper trees of the house enclosure. There was no reason for my stealing out (all methods of progression being open to me), but I preferred it.

About the straggling building of the homestead the great weeping pepper trees grew so thickly that they formed endless little secret green houses and tunnels above the hot red earth, and, if one so wished, it was possible to go right round the enclosure walking Mowgli fashion along the big curly-barked branches.

Cautiously I approached 'the ladder tree,' one of whose limbs swept to the ground, thus forming a precipitous hidden stairway through a dense green thicket of young growth. Up this I ran, small brown feet sure from constant practice, and disdaining to steady myself by hand. Then up the

immense old trunk. Ten, twenty, thirty feet up, and the wonderful journey was begun. Now you would be hidden, hidden deep in the green small-ferned leaves, and had to push your way between the dense young limbs. Then would come a space where you must walk balancing along the top of a great bough, and above you was the deep blue sky, with feathered leaves and bunches of little, pink, paper-jacketed berries against it. Now beneath you and all about were only leaves and branches, and there might not be anything else in all the world for all that you could see. Then you came out high above the old bark roof of the kitchen, or looked down on to the red gravel yard, with the little streams that watered the pepper trees hurrying across it. And from one place you could look away over the irrigation to the sand hill where the wild pie-melons and bloodweeds grew. From another lookout you saw the fowl-yards, and everywhere, and beyond everything, the great greyness of the mulga scrub.

There were many things of surpassing interest in that small high world of the trees. Willy-wagtails built dainty little nests in deep crotches, and the mud homes of the black-and-gold hornets clung to the under branches. Slim wild bees came to the fine cream lace of the pepper flowers, and blue-and-ruby mistletoe birds ate the half-formed bitter berries; innumerable spiders spread their webs between the old limbs, and tiny striped lizards

darted up and down the trunks. Lovely pompous little crested pigeons flirted and strutted and bowed there through the summer days, and sometimes great slow black butterflies with purple eyes on their wings came sailing through the green light. And from the biggest pepper tree of all, you could drop on to the top of the high 'dog-fence' that surrounded the homestead. This I did with infinite stealth, and then disappeared into the glittering box-suckers about the fowl-yards. Having reached the farther edge of the thicket, I knelt and placed my ear to the ground, listening for purely imaginary hoofbeats. Then, starting up, I exclaimed, 'Whist, lads!' to my equally imaginary retinue, and darted back into the bushes. 'Lie low, my hearties!' I commanded (being at the moment 'Captain Dashaway of the Light Dragoons,' as which daring spirit I crawled and wriggled and stalked through many of the tender years of childhood; like Imogen, who couldn't help being Michael, holding with great firmness to the hallucination of manhood). 'Lie low, and black death to the man who sneezes!' — for my well-planned ambuscades were frequently betrayed by the ill-considered sneezing of one of my followers. On this occasion, however, all went well, not even poor Tom Simpkins, who so often got himself into rare trouble, showing the slightest sign of nasal irritation. 'Three hundred Spaniards,' announced I, peering out over the peaceful irrigations aglimmer

in the noon glare. 'Three hundred, and armed to the teeth.' Then, with the courage which I usually displayed in such like trying situations, I added, 'Keep your hearts up, men; there's little chance of it, but they may not see us.' This rather cold comfort having presumably taken effect and lightened the flagging spirits of 'the dare-devil handful of men, who, despite all their wayfaring, hung so breathlessly on the lightest word of their gallant leader,' I, or rather Captain Dashaway resumed his surveillance.

'Ha!' he remarked at last, 'praise Heaven, they are turning south! They have missed our trail . . . but we must lie low a while longer.'

The 'while longer' was considerably abbreviated by the fact that the Captain had been 'lying flat as a shellback' on the nest of some small but warlike ants, and these began to express their resentment. The gallant man rose with more speed than dignity, but even in this emergency mindful of his troops.

'Follow me, men,' he muttered, shaking desperately at his shirt-tail the while. 'Follow me and fear not!'

CHAPTER II

Of the Bold Sea Gull

After a courageous break across the open stretch of short, bleached couch-grass between the box-suckers and the old iron windmill, 'the Captain' led his men into the shelter of 'The Deep Drain,' a narrow six-foot irrigation cutting through the red ironstone gravel.

For years it had lain in disuse, and was choked by a tangled growth of miranda, or bulrush. There was just room to squeeze between the velvet-headed reeds and the hot red gravel of the bank, and both rose high above my head. All little streams of water in an arid land are delightful things, but I have never seen one that I loved as I loved the Deep Drain. Black-and-gold wasps collected mud at the water edge, dragon-fly wings made tiny rainbows, and little fire-blue kingfishers darted from their holes in the red bank, as I brushed along. The sun in his glory poured down on my great white helmet, and drifting brown fluff from overripe bulrush heads stuck to my clothes, while the pebbles burnt my little hard feet. After travelling for about fifty yards, and encountering several imaginary rhinoceroses of exceedingly ferocious order, I reached a little sand-floored bayou, with red walls, sheer as miniature

cliffs. A grey-green-leaved, gold-flowered bean bush leaned over it, sharp-cut against the hard blue sky, and all the rest of the world was hidden except the green rushes and the red top of the farther bank, and then sky and sky, and seemingly beyond that endless sky again. Though sometimes I might see an eagle swinging a thousand feet up in the vastness of sunshine, or if I lay quite dreadfully still the tiny painted sandpipers would dart past my feet, or a red-legged blue baldcoot glittering like metal. To-day, after peering up and down the reed-filled drain, and even scanning with suspicion the infinities of heaven, I lifted a trailing ice plant that clung to the red wall, and from a little cave drew out my 'most sacredest' treasures. I had never cared much for big dolls, and the darlings of my heart were Duncan, a small decrepit iron tortoise; Lionel Leonard, a terrible yellow-china lion, and High-Hops, a little brass frog. They had been mine from earliest years, but so far I had never wearied of their adventures (mostly of a bloody nature) or of their decidedly battered attractions. When they were assembled, I took out the two new dolls: tiny things no higher than my hand, and of a truly dreamlike beauty. One was a boy, the other a girl, but there the difference ended, for both had complexions as of cream and roses, while their china-blue eyes were equally innocent and goiterous. By their sides Lionel and Duncan showed an unsuspected shabbiness and

lack of charm. They really were very old toys . . . then conscience pricked me.

'I will,' I assured them, 'I will always love you best, for you were my *first born*' (I was not quite sure what 'first born' meant, but I liked the sound of it). 'At least,' I added, in part seduced by the dolls' loveliness, 'I will try very hard to.'

From somewhere up the sunny drain came dejected and mysterious sounds, supposedly representing the hoot of a mopoke, but in reality far more akin to a cock afflicted with croup. I hastily secreted my toys, and then with perfect gravity I replied,

'Gobble-gobble-gobble!'

'Coo-woop, coo-woop,' answered Dickie from the bulrushes.

Dickie was my brother and I loved him with a great and abiding love, but I also entertained the secret fear that he was rather stupid. It took him so dreadfully long to learn anything, and although he was two years older than I, I had to think of all the games and 'countersigns.' Then, when I *had* thought of them, Dickie puckered up his forehead, altered them just a little, and said that they were his. This I heartily resented, although I realized that it was a not uncommon masculine failing, having frequently observed my father adopt the same tactics with my mother; still it evinced a disappointing lack of those qualities of leadership so marked in Captain Dashaway. And then, if we

had something interesting to tell, Dickie's ears would glow pink as roses, while Dickie got so hopelessly mixed that I usually ended by telling the story for him — which always made him more or less fierce. Also he believed everything that people told him, even the stories of old Jim the Trapper. . . . When Dickie came out of the reeds I saw that he was smitten with some sore trouble, for his ears flamed, and his forehead was contracted until his little golden-fluff eyebrows nearly touched each other.

''Lo, Joan,' he remarked with sepulchral hopelessness. The cause of his suffering was not far to seek, for in his hand he held a little brown book with gold lilies and sun rays on it called 'Flowers of Verse,' commonly employed at that time by ruthless parents in the torture of small children. Neither Dickie nor I had been to school, but we had each week to acquire some useful information, and to learn by heart a piece of poetry. I had strong dramatic instincts, and used to render the story of Casabianca and the May Queen with great feeling, at times moving myself, if not my audience, to tears, but Dickie was not so constituted. I took the little book from him ——

'Try "The Wild Sea Gull,"' I suggested. Dickie seated himself despondently before me. I knew his limitations: 'We will get one line right for a start,' I remarked, with a false simulation of hope.

'The bold sea gull! the wild sea gull!'

'T-h-e — b-o-l-d — s-e-a — g-u-l-l — t-h-e — w-i-l-d — s-e-a — g-u-l-l,' said Dickie with great slowness, and tone of despair. It certainly lacked feeling, but on the whole I was not discouraged. I had spent most of the previous week teaching him —

> 'There is no flock however watched and tended,
> But one dead lamb is there,
> There is no fireside howsoe'er defended,
> But has one vacant chair.'

When he recited it, he said that there was no fire however watched and tended but one dead lamb was there (which was obviously objectionable). So on the whole he was doing well with the sea gull.

'Well done,' I said; 'only say it like this, "the *bold* sea gull! The *wild* sea gull!"'

'Oh — *the*boldse*gull*, *the*wildse*gull*,' said Dickie very rapidly, in a curious sprightly singsong, which one felt veiled hidden depths of gloom.

'A *gallant* bird is he!' I exclaimed with great fervour.

'A — g-a-l-l-a-n-t — b-i-r-d — i-s — h-e,' said Dickie, relapsing into melancholia.

'Now try the whole lot.'

'T-h-e — b-o-l-d — s-e-a — g-u-l-l, t-h-e — *b-a-d* — s-e-a — g-u-l-l,' said Dickie, as though lamenting its depravity.

'No, Dickie, *not* the bad sea gull . . . think!'

Dickie cogitated deeply, his blue eyes bleak with misery.

'T-h-e — *b-o-l-d* s-e-a g-u-l-l — t-h-e w-i-l-d s-e-a g-u-l-l, a — *what* sort of a bird is he, Joan?'

'Try yourself.'

'A . . . a gentle bird is she?'

'No!'

'A *loving* bird is he!' exclaimed Dickie with sudden triumph. (He had recently studied the poetic love affairs of the turtle-dove.)

'No, stupid!'

'Then I don't care what sort of a bird he is — so there!' He regarded me with a resentment which I felt to be the height of ingratitude.

'Well, learn it for yourself, muttonhead,' I retorted bitterly.

He took the book and for a while his ruddy lips worked in a tortured way, then he gave up the wild sea gull and tried Wordsworth's 'Daffodils.'

Quarrels always rolled off Dickie like the lightest of showers on the very sleekest of ducks. Presently he looked up with a radiant face.

'Take the book and see if I'm right, Joany,' he said.

Then with characteristic melancholy he recited, 'My heart with rapture *fills*, and dances with the daffy-*dills*.'

CHAPTER III

Of Things Small and Valiant

My mother was a small woman but resolute; my father kindly, jovial, large-framed, and loving, gifted with perfect health, but addicted to patent medicines. Indeed his views on the science of healing were somewhat original. Once he was found, dear ruddy face abeam above curly gold-grey beard, intently studying the label of a quinine bottle.

'To be taken until the ears *sing*,' he read aloud, with considerable satisfaction. 'That ought to stir the 'possum in a man; I think I'll take some.' His disappointment was pronounced upon learning that the said soul-satisfying singing could only be produced by repeated doses, and not by one deep draught.

And again, when one of the stallions sickened, my father and the head stockman stood beside its quivering body.

'I'll stay at home to-day, Jim,' said the dear old fellow, 'and dose this horse.'

The man looked startled. 'But, sir, we haven't any medicine, and anyway we don't know what's the matter with him,' he protested feebly.

'I can't let him die just because of that,' said my father. 'I'll fill him up with baking soda and treacle.'

The horse lived, due, Jim said, to its personal esteem for my father. And indeed if it did not love him it was an unperceiving beast.

He usually wore a huge panama hat, old, old clothes, and pebbly, nickel-rimmed glasses, and drove a rotund pair of ponies, which he started with the concise command, 'Gee-back! Get-up! Way!' He had been one of the kings of the road in the days when droving might mean a three-thousand-mile trek across a half-known continent. Thrice he had gone with over twenty thousand sheep from the bleak foot of the Victorian Alps, across the great smiling width of New South Wales, through baked Queensland, up onto the verge of Carpentaria, until he touched at last the outmost border-line of civilization, and beyond lay only the 'Myall' country of the blacks. He could, when he would, tell royal tales of flood and fire and drought, of the stations twelve thousand square miles in extent, of illimitable herds; of how they used to start their sheep across the flood waters by tying one to a rope and hauling him from the farther shore, and his woolly comrades, apparently comforted by the anything but reassuring sight of his foundering progress, would plunge in after him . . . of how they had wrapped the wagonettes in tarpaulins, and then floated them across the wide, slow-flowing rivers like boats . . . of dingoes so unafraid that they would raid the camps in daylight and carry off leggings and bits of harness . . . of 'Bull

Derins,' the famous bushman, who had earned his living and his name by taking herds of valuable bulls out from the settled districts into the far-flung cattle country of the North and selling them for golden figures . . . of how 'Bull' had told the manager of one of the border-line stations that he wanted to get a new black boy, and they had looked across the immensity of plain to where against the setting sun hung a thin trail of smoke, and 'Bull' had said it must be a 'Myall' camp and that he was going there. The manager warned him that you could not judge the distance of smoke in that flat country of the Gulf. But he was a splendid bushman, and he laughed, and rode off with his two sons towards the little smoke-line that rose from beyond the horizon and beyond the country of the white man. He rode over the curve of the world, and he rode back again — almost. Later a drover found him and his two sons, dead beside their dead horses, and the horses' throats were cut, but the men had not drunk the blood, and so they could not have died of thirst. And also they were almost within reach of a water that 'Bull Derins' knew well. Their bodies were without wound, and none knew how or why they died.

Oh, royal tales! that Dickie and I listened to with hushed reverence. Tales of daring, of high adventure, such as the taming world will soon know no more. But the story that my father himself loved best was of the down larks — 'the Singing

Gold': how as they drove the slow-moving sheep across the plains of the Central West, whose only fence rails were the sky, the clicking, pattering tread of sixty thousand little hoofs would scatter in flight all the tiny grass life. Long-bodied mantas with rainbow wings, grasshoppers with sharp-thorned orange legs, flocks of quail, and agitated lizards all fled before the steady onpouring of the far-spread mob. And all day long a million larks fluttered singing into the sunshine, and the little cruel hawks of the plains followed the travelling sheep and preyed upon the living sparks of music. Singing they rose, although they knew that the hawks were waiting for them, singing even as they fled from the talons of death. For on the pitiless sun-bleached splendour of the downs there was no shelter for them, and so they rose singing by the hundred, and by the hundred were butchered. Once, as the sheep drifted slowly across the gold immensity of down, under the gold immensity of evening, and even the woolly backs were gold, and the rising larks and the hovering hawks so many sparks of fire, my father heard a little rush of song, and something soft and quivering darted into his open shirt and nestled against his great chest, while the thwarted hawk circled above his head calling shrilly. He had carried the desperate, beautiful atom there until the safety of darkness came; and, dear, rough, gentle old man that he was, even after thirty years I never saw him tell of

it without tear-blurred eyes. It had been so frightened and so small and valiant, that it had flown not only into his shirt but his heart.

Of his personal achievements he was very reticent, but he had only to own a thing to be convinced of its surprising worth and rarity. He was inordinately proud of our homestead, with its great pepper trees, and rose-flowered oleander bushes that smelt like all the summers in the world. He thought his station the finest in Queensland, and was convinced that he had the most able wife and the smartest children that ever man was blessed with. I do not wish to exaggerate the optimism of his all-loving nature, but I think that he even thought me pretty. And he worked happily, tremendously, at the slow improvement of his property.

Dickie was very like him in many ways. Over beyond the nice, shiny, red gravel, across which the pepper boughs swished, and beyond the oleander bushes which my father so loved, was the vegetable garden, where we grew big pale-patterned watermelons and heavy pumpkins. And in this garden Dickie used to do great diggings, until his little nose was pink all over and the perspiration dripped from it in big drips. He was what my father called 'a great little worker,' and he was brave with the bravery of fear. When we were very little and my mother sent us to catch the clucky hens, I used to know that he was scared by

the way he screwed up his forehead and smiled with his lips. If there was a hen that pecked, he used to insist on catching it. His face would get rather white, and he lifted the hen very slowly and carefully. . . . And again and again, as we grew older. . . .

Once we went through the boronia thickets in the spell paddock on a blue day of early summer. The dust was red as red, and the tall boronia bushes were at the height of their glory. Purest, most radiant yellow, thick-massed with a million tiny golden cups, loaded and bent and packed with blossom, richer than the sunshine. Pale yellow, deep yellow, fresh flowers and clusters ripely sun-faded. Yellow, yellow, yellow, a great shout of colour between the hard blue sky and the red dust, filling all the world with their delicate warm scent that seemed the scent of sunshine. The little black ants raced through their little runways in the dust, bees tumbled drunkenly from the flower masses, and the shadows of the flowers made patterns on the red earth. It was summer, summer, and as we brushed along we scattered cataracts of gold, trod on gold, and buried our small brown faces in golden flowers. And then round the slender grey stems of a boronia bush, sleepily pushing his way through the drifts of fallen petals, came a big brown snake. His scales twinkled in the mottled shadow and sunlight, and a heavy pollen-covered bee fell out of the flowers above him and landed, legs in air, on

a shining coil. The snake took no notice either of us or of the tipsy bee; he was intent on some works of his own. The little yellow petals kept settling on him as he went. . . . We backed our way into the open, and I turned to seek the road, but Dickie was looking for a stick.

'What are you going to do, Dickie?' I asked. I always felt responsible for Dickie, which was unjust, for he took not the slightest notice of me; a responsibility that you must take may be trying at times, but it's nothing to a responsibility that won't be taken.

'I'm going to kill that snake,' he said, forehead puckered.

Daddy never killed them unless they came about the house, and it had looked so comfortable in the golden thicket . . . also I was afraid for Dickie; in that tangle all the advantage was with the snake.

'*Don't*,' I said, 'it's silly . . .'

'No, it's not, Joe.'

He advanced upon the thicket, little face set. I caught at his stick. He turned, breathing fast.

'Don't you see I've *got* to kill him, because I'm afraid of him?' Purely masculine reasoning this, and to my mind rather hard on the snake.

I sat me down on a log in the fierce sunshine and watched the heaving and shaking of the yellow flowers, and the rising of bees.

Presently Dickie came out again.

'I couldn't find him.'

'I'm *glad* you couldn't,' I said with something of a sting.

'So am I,' he announced unexpectedly. 'But you see, I had to look.'

He frightened me outrageously on countless occasions, my one consolation being that he frightened himself more. Once we went out for a walk in the rain, down the old road by the irrigations, and there were little shiny pools everywhere, and the grey mulga-trees were foam-green like the sea, and you could smell the gidya flats miles away. Dickie had sprained his ankle some weeks before and he limped badly, but he wanted to come because the world was wonderful with rain scents and in the shelter of the fallen logs the tiny green earth ferns were beginning to unroll. As we went, two yellow-legged plovers raced across the road ahead of us, and their little tracks were sharp in the red mud. Then presently I saw the big blunt prints of Raa, the polled Angus bull. He had been with the milkers from the time that he was a curly red calf and my father warned us that he was much more dangerous than the lumbering herd bulls on the run. He delighted in walking round some inoffensive person and pawing up the dust with slow strokes, while he made queer rumblings in his throat. So far he had never done anything except paw and rumble, but we were both instructed to leave him alone. I knew that Dickie — who was usually an obedient little boy — must be badly

scared of him, for he would go where the bull was and walk past him whistling, 'Britons never shall be slaves.' When the ground was dry, and Dickie's foot all right, I don't think there was really much danger in this musical exercise, and it seemed to do Dickie good; but with a sprained ankle and on slippery ground it was different.

'Let us go back, Dickie,' I said; 'I would sooner go to the sand hill.'

But Dickie, too, had seen the big track, and Raa himself leaning against a stump about a hundred yards ahead. I knew from his expression (Dickie's, not the bull's) that he was just going to whistle 'Rule, Britannia,' and I caught his arm.

'Let us go round, Dick!'

He was only ten, but he already belonged to that unreasoning order of persons who feel that their personal dignity has suffered if they are diverted from their path by anything short of an avalanche.

He said, 'People who go round are *cowards*,' and kept on down the middle of the road, but it seemed to me that his legs wobbled more than his lameness necessitated. Raa drew a windy breath and ponderously turned to face us. The rain had darkened his coat and he looked more majestically piglike than ever, with his great shoulders and angry little eyes. I was sick with fear for Dickie, and yet I noticed the beautiful markings on Raa's front hoof, resting on a tussock. His other hoofs were sinking slowly beneath his weight and the red mud,

cushioned up round them . . . and if he charged and Dickie slipped, the broad blunt hoofs would crush his little back and thighs, and he would lie there struggling in the mud like the snake that Jim killed near the pepper trees . . . I felt the agony in my own back through pure vehemence of fear . . . and the skin would break beneath them and they would sink in and break the white bones and they would splinter and run down and in . . . I looked at Dickie with mingled rage and anguish. He advanced whistling with his hands in his pockets. Raa lifted his upper lip, and blew softly, and a long strand of gossamer slime went drifting away. They were only a few feet apart now. Then Raa tossed his head with slow grandeur, turned about, and went lumbering off in the falling rain. Dickie caught his breath — and began to cry.

When Dickie was happy, he had the same laughing blue eyes as my father, and the same bright ruddy cheeks, and I think that father was prouder of him than of all his other possessions put together. At the time, after carefully reviewing Dickie's and my relative attractions, I felt that this displayed very bad taste on his part; but after all it was not strange, since he so loved all things small and valiant.

CHAPTER IV

Concerning Prices

The big blue jug hit the floor with a shattering bang; for a moment it seemed to my distraught vision that it sat there looking preternaturally large and lovely; then it disintegrated at my feet. My mother and I regarded the ruins. I with the blankness of inescapable guilt, she with a rumination whose subject I knew only too well.

'That jug cost *at least* three pounds, five years ago,' she said, 'and you wouldn't get it for twice that *now*.'

I felt crushed. If she had said, 'You are a very naughty little girl,' or, 'How careless,' I might have tried to defend myself, but my mother was far too experienced a housewife for that. No, she simply mentioned the price of the jug five years ago, which of course you could not contradict, not having bought the jug, and left the rest to your conscience, for of course you could see for yourself the state the jug was in now.

'You never seem to remember the value of anything,' added my mother; and I hung my head, for I knew that it was true. I felt already that as a woman I must be a pathetic and more or less immoral failure (this partially explaining my attachment for the Captain). I *knew* exactly what a

woman should be, however. Firstly, she must know the precise value of every sauce bottle, teaspoon, and toast-rack in the house, and, when any member of her family breaks, mislays, or loses one of these articles, she must be prepared instantly to double its value — say, four years ago — and observe the effect of this announcement upon the guilty party. If any lingering trace of hope remains about them, the ideal woman then says —

'No, let me see — it was *more* than that. I was thinking of the price of kitchen silver, *this* teaspoon cost ——' She then trebles its original value, and says that it was a particular bargain at the price too; that when your Uncle James saw it he refused with mocking incredulity to believe that such a teaspoon ever had been bought for such a price. The culprit is usually prostrate with remorse by this time, but in the case of particularly hardened criminals your good housewife will add that she doubts if the teaspoon could now be replaced at all; that when, last week, taking into consideration the teaspoonal laxity of her family's conduct, she wrote to Jones and Spiggins, hinting at the possibility of having to buy more teaspoons in the near future, they had replied, with regret, that, much as they esteemed the custom of the house of Smith, and although they would exert every effort in our behalf, they feared that the order for teaspoons could not be fulfilled — at least not with the quality of teaspoons they would care to send.

You now know exactly what you have done. You have lost a teaspoon that was considerably more valuable than its weight in platinum and diamonds even five years ago, and that is at the present time 'worth double that'; a teaspoon that was into the bargain a veritable gift; a teaspoon that filled the discerning eye of Uncle James with wonder and envy; and above all a teaspoon that can *never* be replaced — not even by Jones and Spiggins. You have also lost a good deal of your day, as has the good housewife, but she 'has kept an eye on things,' and you have been reminded of the fact that the said 'things' cost money.

Now, looking at the broken jug and at my mother, I felt that I could never do this. I wondered vaguely if it would do as well to paste little labels on the furniture, and yet that idea was rather dreadful; think of sitting in a chair marked, '£5, and a bargain,' supported by a cushion labelled, '£1, and I made it myself and teased all the kapok,' while your feet rested on linoleum at '£1/5/– a yard, and you wouldn't replace it now — not real inlaid — for £3'; to me it seemed unhomely, and yet that was what every really good woman must spend her life doing.

I tried to get the right frame of mind as I mopped up the remains of the jug with a dishcloth, 'that you didn't get for nothing.' But it was useless, and I gloomily pictured the wild grief of my handsome long-whiskered husband 'Frederick'

(who alternated with Captain Dashaway in the beguiling of my leisure hours) when the unhappy man should discover that the wife of his bosom could not keep house. I had a truly harrowing mental vision of him on one knee, his limpid blue eyes thick with tears, as he implored me for our children's sake to exert myself. I had often heard my father say that it was no wonder that men divorced their wives when you looked at modern housekeepers . . . before *me* there was nothing but the pitiless courtroom. My children were always a vague and varying quantity, appearing and disappearing as occasion demanded. In 'the courtroom scene,' as a playwright would put it, there were large quantities of them, pale and neglected, all messy with long fair hair and torrents of tears, children who clung to me with weak wailings as I was 'borne away' (whither I was not quite clear, but to be 'borne' seemed to my young mind the only appropriate exit for the divorcee).

'"Mother!" came the voice of little Evangeline,' I murmured as I dropped the broken china into the flour bin in mistake for the rubbish tip. 'And the terrible sound of a strong man's sobbing filled the room,' and all because I could not remember the price of teaspoons! The awful pathos of it overcame me. In a moist and snivelling condition I walked towards 'the blacksmith's shop,' Billy the blacksmith being my particular friend. He was engaged in his usual smithy-like pastime of beat-

ing a little piece of red-hot iron out flat, then beating it up round again. When he had got it quite flat or quite round, he dipped it into water to hear it hiss. He was a short, thin, crotchety, stubbly little man, who read 'Capital' when he wanted something light in the way of literature. But when I was little he used to give me rides on top of the great forge bellows, and cut slightly erratic pigs out of sheet iron for my farm.

'Billy,' I told him wearily, 'I broke the best bedroom jug and I will . . . will make — a — a — failure of my marriage.' My tears welled again.

Billy looked at me out of bright eyes under fierce little eyebrows. 'And why?' he asked gravely.

'Because I will never be able to keep house,' I told him, recklessly unburdening my soul. 'And divorce is so dreadful for the . . . the children . . .'

Billy got up hastily and tried to beat the little piece of iron out flat again, but it was too cold. When he sat down he said slowly:

'My wife were the best housekeeper in Bakingboard . . .' he seemed to drift away, in what I assumed to be delicious reveries; for a while I did not like to disturb him, then I ventured —

'What else, Billy?'

'I'm here,' said he.

'And your wife . . . ?' But I *knew*; such a woman must be with the heavenly host, or her

husband could never have been torn from her side.

'She's in Bakingboard,' said Billy, and getting up he prepared to beat the little bit of iron some more.

CHAPTER V

Of Following Feet

When I was twelve years old, Dickie was sent to school to Sydney, and I missed him terribly; but when one is twelve one lives in such a press of important business that grief, however poignant, must be set aside for odd moments. Also I still spent a good deal of my time as Captain Dashaway, and this stern man had no time for tears, except, of course, those wrung from his fallen foes. After coming definitely to the conclusion that I never could be a housekeeper, and that therefore only celibacy awaited me, I sorrowfully gave up the handsome Frederick; the contemplation of his suffering being too harrowing. (Billy had tried in vain to reassure me.) My numerous pale and pathetic children I was also forced to resign, as Captain Dashaway's 'beautiful betrothed' had fallen dead in his arms on the eve of the wedding day, this tragedy in part accounting for the ruthless recklessness of the man's character.

Strange the little things that jump from the coloured blur of childhood — you realize it only when you go to write. Of whole years you have but vaguest sunny memory, and yet certain days are sharp to the least little detail, their small grasses still agrowing, and the bees flying across

them. Shortly after Dickie went away, my father gave me my first big rifle, a thirty-two Winchester. I had long possessed and loved a little twenty-two automatic, and with it had slain many marauding crows about the box-suckered fowl-yards, but the yearning for big game was strong in me.

'May I go shooting kangaroo?' I asked, clasping the gleaming treasure to my breast. My father smiled, his cheeks bunching ruddily above his grey beard, and the little crow's-feet deepening at the corners of his blue eyes.

'You can go and try to, Joe,' he said, regarding my breeched figure with amusement, while his great rough hand rubbed my curls. 'Some one has to shoot the poor destructive devils . . . But I doubt if there's much blood on your small head this night,' he added.

I filled my pockets with ammunition, stuck a huge and delightfully ferocious-looking skinning-knife through my belt, and set out into the spell paddock. All about the homestead, just beyond the man-made green of the irrigations, washed the grey tide of the mulga, little-grey-trees-all-alike, varying but slightly with the changing seasons — almost the last of living things to die when the periodic thirst of drought drained and blistered the land. Little, stiff, sun-beaten ash-grey trees that belong to the West Country as no other trees do. . . . The spell paddock had once been cleared, but the mulga came again a thousand times thicker

than before, and there were dense, grey-ashen walls beside the red roads, and endless tangles through which one could not ride; and if you stood erect you would not see into them for the length of your arm, but by crouching down you might look away, and away, between the little grey stems; into a queer sun-flecked grey world, floored by the red ironstone gravel laced with the lighter red ribbons of sheep pads, and roofed with dense grey leaves, because the little nibbling sheep, who love the mulga, had eaten it off as high as they could reach, so that each tree looked as though it had been trimmed by an enthusiastic gardener. I loved the spell paddock, with its tangles, and its little opens, where in a wet spring the wild blue cornflowers and yellow native pansy grew; it was a warm, wind-sheltered, thrillingly secret place. . . . So I went down through the mulga, and the boronia thickets, all draped in green seed-pods now, and then came out on the banks of the Long Drain: a strong-flowing artesian water channel still warm from the bore three miles away; a particularly fascinating drain, for it dived through patches of feathery wild may, the little hardy flower that comes out snowy white, and then gradually changes through all shades of pink to deepest ruby red, and the water took enticing turns round large red stones, on which the blue-and-scarlet dragon-flies sunned, and it was bordered by the softest toe-tickliest ribbon of purple-seeded couch-

grass, while the refracted sunlight made changing amber patterns on the red gravel bottom. A dear drain, but presently I left it and crept down a narrow sheep pad to the edge of the Big Swamp. Under the suction of the summer sun the white clay-thick water had receded from the swamp edges, leaving the great masses of miranda to wither standing above the hot iron-hard clay. They were bleached and seared to a golden straw-pink, and from them rose the grey trunks of dead box-trees, violet against the blueness of the sky. As I walked softly beside the jungle of dead reeds, which lifted faded velvet spears eight feet into the sunlight, red-legged dark blue baldcoots scattered noisily for shelter, and frightened grey rabbits darted into the dry rushes, or crouched motionless in their forms at the roots of stunted crimson swamp fuchsia. Hawks were wheeling overhead, and at times there came the calling of ducks. The air was very hot, very still.

Through a break in the miranda I looked out onto the green-grey cane-grass clumps, and sedgy puddles of the inner swamp, and at the foot of a compact little brigalow-tree, shining like a silver ball in the distance, there was a gleam of rosy purple; I threaded my way towards it over the slimy-grey ground between the pools, and a family of half-grown teal hurried down a waterway through the cane-grass. Tadpoles and beetles churned and rippled in the muddy gilgies, and two sea gulls,

with clean-cut wings, rose fighting over a plump frog: their black heads and white plumage very sharp against the sky; they visited us only when the inland swamps swarmed with tiny life. The rose-purple was a tuft of belated swamp-pea, lifting sweet-scented flowers from the grey mud in the shade of the little yarron-tree; and three black-and-lemon butterflies drifted about it. Countless gold-and-black wasps gathered clay in the moist depressions of old cattle tracks; reed warblers and little talkative finches twinkled past; and all the swamp was filled with the warm humming and murmuring of life. I stuck the purple pea flowers in my hat, and leaving the steamy, teeming swamp-world I rejoined the drain; moving cautiously beneath the tangled boughs and brushing aside the fine-feathered red may. The 'old men' kangaroos often slept near the water through the heat, liking the dense shade and the soft thick couch-grass; but to-day I saw only a big yellow wild cat, crouching menacingly above a half-eaten plover; and disappointedly I struck away to the south past the deserted brush sheep yards. Little dusty pads ran between the decaying fences, over which the wild pie-melons climbed. In and out of the sun-bleached twigs twisted the tender blue-green vines; some trailers frilling out for yards across the ground, displaying their green-patterned melons by contrast with the red earth. There were melons, and melons, and melons piled in the sunshine about the

old fences; just as if some one had held market-day there; long pale green melons, melons darkly traced and patched, and baby melons covered with silver down, like fine silk. On the smooth side of one a willy wagtail was killing a sulphur-coloured butterfly. I took the long-disused road to the 'Turkey Plain,' which like most bush names seemed simply to have come, and would so remain for ever, in defiance of all more appropriate titles and a complete absence of turkeys. I swung along through the mulga for about four miles, and then as I neared the plain the country changed: huge half-dead box-trees taking the place of the little mulgas; immense twisted old trees slowly dying in the grip of orange-red mistletoes hanging like flames in the sunshine. Here, too, in the hollow limbs innumerable wild bees nested. I climbed the sloping stem of a fallen giant, until I was high above the sandalwood scrub which walled the little plain. The men had told me that I was sure to find kangaroos at sundown in the belt of mulga to the east, for the South Drain had overflowed and formed a stretch of rich green picking. It was only about half a mile away, and there were still two hours or more to wait, so I came down from my lookout, and curled up in the warm sand at the foot of a sandalwood bush, and went to sleep like the little half-animal I was. When I woke it was almost sundown, and I had to travel at a run, swinging my rifle beside me and darting in and out

through the pale gold-and-violet of old trunks touched by the last gleam of sunlight, and above me the great mistletoe shone strongly in the tree-tops. I reached the South Drain just as the sun vanished, and pushing silently through the dense mulga came with unexpected suddenness onto the breakaway; a small open space of moist earth, walled in by the shadowy blue masses of the mulga, under a pale gold, shimmering sky. The drain had been overflowing for some months, and the unaccustomed water had wakened the long-sleeping wild lily bulbs; everywhere the succulent green leaves were breaking through the red ground, and some were already in flower, their big spidery white stars shining in the twilight. The still air was rich with their scent.

Twenty yards from me a great kangaroo was feeding; in one hand he grasped the round green stem of a lily, with the other he thoughtfully scratched his back. His eyes were very dark and soft, and I could see the velvet of his lips, with one white petal caught between them.

At the click of a cocking rifle he sat erect, showing his creamy, thick-furred chest. I do not remember pulling the trigger, but there was the crash of a shot, a heavy slow thud, and . . . a quivering grey form amongst the broken lilies. I ran to my prize and knelt beside him; up till that moment I had felt nothing but the joy of the hunter. I laid my hand on the huge warm bulk and the strong animal

scent of him was in my nostrils. I tried to meet my hands about the base of the great tail, but they could not span it. Then I ran my hand exultingly up the soft furred side . . . and just above the heart was a spreading crimson stain; while between his lips he still held the fragile petal. An awful and quite unexpected pity seized me. He was dead, dead, and he would never eat any more lilies in the soft evening . . . and I had killed him. For a while I could not believe it — he was so big. He had been eating, had been *alive*, and now he was like this. My hand crept out to the red stain . . . it was hot, and I jumped to my feet with a shriek. For the first time I was afraid of the stillness and the shadows, and I turned and fled, and just behind me something was coming, coming . . . and my hand was wet and sticky, but I dared not wait to wash it in the drain, and my feet pattered loudly, and behind me came other feet . . . Then from the drain bank before me a night bird rose, giving one of the loud, unearthly cries in which night birds specialize, and driving the blood chokingly back to my heart.

It was very dark and warm, and overhead were the soft summer stars; but my teeth chattered with cold, and all my throat was dry.

That night of my first big kill, so longed for, was one of the most dreadful of my life. Another of my illusions was shattered; not only could I not be a good wife; I could not apparently be a mighty hunter.

Next morning in the first sunlight I passed Mrs. Gluber, our stolid Australian-German cook, weeding in the vegetable garden; she wore a blue apron over a pink crêpe dress, and all about her was the tender green of young spinach. Her thick black hair was coiled low on her thick neck, and her broad peasant face was red as the peach tomatoes; her coarse brown-red fingers pulled up the little weeds, and shook off the moist earth quickly and deftly. Sometimes she brought up a big white grub, and very majestically, very deliberately, she trod on it.

'Mrs. Gluber, why do you suppose God *made* grubs?' I asked.

'I should say, Miss Joan, that was the Lord's business. It's mine to kill them.'

Problems were not for Mrs. Gluber. She killed the fat white fellows, calmly, efficiently, and without compunction. It was quite restful to watch her, there among the bright vegetables, with the blue sky above.

I felt suddenly happy, and I whistled as I went back to skin my kangaroo.

CHAPTER VI

Of the Pink Almond Tree

By the old grey slab washhouse, over which the biggest of our grapevines crawled, grew the Pink Almond Tree. It never bore, but when you saw it in blossom you felt that it could hardly be expected to. It was fenced by dilapidated grey rails, and, if you climbed over them and lay on the short bleached grass about the trunk, you could look up and see nothing but flowers and sky . . . with the long wispy white spring clouds moving across it. There were little fat twisted twigs growing from the thick rough grey trunk, with wonderful pale flowers held in little clusters at the end; on some would be a single bud and a crinkled tinted blossom; on others rich little nosegays of fresh pink delight, with hurrying, happy spring bees clambering about them; tenderest, palest, shining pink, dewy-hearted, warm, and pure as only fruit blossoms are. Chokingly, unbelievably beautiful in the fresh sunshine, against the fresh far sky; blunt arms of loveliness massed and packed, and wonderfully enamelled with glory. Shining, shining, giving a something finer than joy . . . I knew all the flowers of our flat grey country: the creamy green spice of sandalwood bells; the rosy-frail swamp pea; and the fringed yellow water-stars.

My small soul was shaken by queer tinglings at the great life-rush after the rains, when the ragged yarrons were flecked with gold, and all about the swamp edges lay the rustling, sharp-scented carpet of the tiny white-paper everlastings, and on the spiny ridges the crimson pericelia and the dark blue lobelias made bright patterns, close to the red sand beneath the cream-flowered bloodweeds; while between the grass tufts above the Fifteen Mile Flat I found the cuplike tufts of the little white ground-flower, with the sweetest scent in all Australia. I knew in what little grassy hollows to look for the fringed pink ground-orchids; in what sheltered corners of the mulga scrub lived the frail, hair-stemmed mauve daisies, and wild candytuft; by what old logs the rare native forget-me-nots kept house; knew which of all the bright hoards of spring would first answer the calling of the tepid rains, and which would longest withstand the shrivelling of summer; knew the grey fluffy seed-heads, and grey rustling skeletons of each heat-slain flower and weed, as they bleached together among the dead herbage.

I loved them all, but none of them gave me the 'thrill' of the blossoming almond tree. It was not as other flowers; it was a shining miracle of perfectness. I lay beneath it with meditative brown hands clasped against my little tummy, and in my own way I worshipped it, in its pink crinkled glory! After a while I rose from the grass, and climbed

carefully into the heart of the tree. . . . There was nothing now save sunfiltered, pale blossom, fresh and cool and marvellous, pressing against my bare brown legs and arms and neck, brushing my eyelids, crinkling against my lips. I could not even see the sky; there was only the paleness, and the beauty, and the blossom, and a great buzzing of bees. It was like being in a fairy bath of flowers; from head to heel they embraced me. . . . Surely it *was* a magic 'Bath of Beauty'; and like the princess from the enchanted well I should emerge transformed, radiantly lovely. The delightful conviction flooded me. Softly I raised my sticklike arms and thrust them far into the enamelled foam of the blossoms. In the magic light they really did seem fairer and more comely. My little horny feet were mercifully hidden from view, and I pressed my small brown face into the dewy mass, and simply *felt* it growing pale and roselike, yea, even as the ladies in the Pears' Soap advertisement on the kitchen wall; my lashes I knew were sweeping my cheek in a lustrous curve; my mouth had become a budded rose. . . . After the passing of long ecstatic minutes I decided to seek the nearest mirror and survey my newfound beauty.

My usual monkey's agility seemed unbefitting, so I began to descend with what I assumed to be 'a swanlike grace.' With a gliding motion I extended one foot towards the top rail of the fence, and just as the rhythmic action was completed I

placed my stubby toe firmly upon a slumbering bee; when, as with Cupid, 'the bee awoke with anger wild,' and with a cry of inexpressible anguish I fell out of the fairy tree and landed in an anything but fairylike manner on the hard red gravel outside the rails.

'What,' said a man's voice — 'what in Heaven's name is *that*?'

'*That*,' replied my father, 'is, I think, my daughter Joan Jerington-Whatmore.'

With a grimace of heroic and silent suffering, which doubtless did not improve my never attractive, and, alas, unaltered, appearance, I looked upon them with undisguised and bitter loathing; whereat their coarse merriment was but increased. I rose, and, deigning no reply to their queries, I began to leap one-footedly away towards the Deep Drain.

'I think a bee must have got the poor kid,' said the tall fair young man; 'I'll get the sting out . . .'

He followed me with long strides and I increased my leaping, agonized speed. He overtook me and grasped me with a powerful sunburnt hand, and I struggled vigorously.

'If,' I gasped, 'you don't let me go, I'll *bite* you . . . !'

'You won't do it twice,' he warned. 'I'm not at all edible — tough and very indigestible in fact. . . . Show me the foot.'

'I *won't*!'

'Leave the little devil alone,' called my father, and I knew that he was very angry. 'You are a rude, unmannerly girl, Joan,' he added. 'A nice way to receive help. You're old enough to know better.' For I had reached that somewhat complicated period of youth when one 'is old enough to know better' than to do all the things that one does, but not nearly old enough to know what one ought to want to do.

'Oh, I say,' protested the stranger, 'a bee sting on the big toe would have smashed Griselda's reputation to smithers . . . and we must get it out.' He seated himself on a log and placed me across his knee.

'If you're not still,' he remarked, 'I'll regret it, but I'll have to sit on your head.'

I lay still while he turned up my dirty little foot and deftly removed the sting.

'Now, don't go rushing me with thanks,' he admonished; 'they only embarrass me. It was nothing, nothing, I assure you; simple act of courtesy and no more. I know you'd like to call me Uncle Joseph, of course, and name your first child after me, but I'd much sooner not be responsible for its transgressions, so please select another godfather when the time comes . . . and, as for my name, well, I'm usually called Jerry.'

He set me upon my feet, and with a sob of rage I limped away. Thus Jerry Henton came into our sunny monotony of days. Officially he was book-

keeper, but as a rule he went out onto the run with my father, and joined, with a certain humorous ardour, in the immense slow labouring of the West Country.

'I don't know *why* one does it,' he said. 'There are places on this world of ours where you can lie in a cocoanut shade among dangling ferns and spotted orchids and things, while the purple sea turns green at the sight of the beach, and black boys fan your august white toes and serve cool drinks and ripe yellow fruit. . . . And yet men come out here and even shorten their sleep so as to be able to go out and sweat and blister a bit longer under a sun that's doing his kindly best to give them cancer. . . . Yet the red-grey pancake of a place gets you,' he added.

My father thought that he would not stay, but he did, and by degrees we all came to love him. . . . And we rode, and walked, and read together, Jerry and I, and when my father bought our first car, we drove together round the long boundary fences that ran up out of the sky before you and slipped down into it behind; and he told me endless tales of the queer by-ports of the world, and the gay-coloured, tumultuous doings of men; in exchange I taught him of the little grey-tussock life, and the small, crawly secrets of the mulga thickets, and he seemed to think the exchange a fair one. When he got a splinter he always came to me, and must have suffered excruciatingly at

my clumsy small hands. Together we trained the fat roly-poly puppies, and watered the great rose-oleander bushes, and he told me of ruined white cities where their brothers grew, and only the metallic lizards ran across the sands beneath them.... At night when we played the gramophone under the old trellises, he would tell us stories of the operas, and of how he had seen this one in the Metropolitan Opera House, that at La Scala in Milan. But he never assumed anything of superiority, and he loved to make my father talk of his droving years; of the great stock routes that span a continent; of the long days when they moved through the phantom seas of the white mirage, and the farther cattle seemed knee-deep in water the while they moaned beneath the torture of thirst; and as the old man talked the young man's eyes would shine and dance with the wonder of the tales.

'I hope, Little Comrade, that you realize what a father you have,' he said to me once. 'He always makes me think of the Vikings and the old navigators who went royally tilting round an unknown world in ships that would be condemned now as ferries ... such men are dying out, more's the pity.'

We lay on the sand ridge beyond the irrigations, and below us we saw the black-and-white ibis wading in the shallow drains, and the plover running leggily. Then there was the homestead, with its

great trees and its look of ordered peace; and beyond that the blue grey tide of the mulga. And the last sun turned the windmill wheel to purest gold.

'*Think*; this is all of his making — except the sun and the mulga,' said Jerry, with a certain forgivable exaggeration, his chin resting on his hands. 'It's a wonderful thing, Little Comrade, to write your life on the face of the land like that . . . they are obstinate, wonderful old men, these of the West, Joe; they always remind me a little of the Creator, only when they first looked at this grey semi-desert they said, "Let there be life" . . . instead of "light."'

We watched the windmill wheel turn to rose, then fade into grey; and the little black bats came out and flickered above the pale threads of the irrigation channels. And we did not talk as we walked home, for Jerry was doubtless thinking about his grand old men, and as for me — well, I was thinking that perhaps marriage might not be all teaspoons and salt-shakers, and was wondering why it seemed to have some sort of connection with the sweetness of almond flowers.

CHAPTER VII

Of Aunt Austace

When I was fourteen my family decided to send me to school; or, to be accurate, my Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore and Billy the Blacksmith decided it for them. For years past my mother had been saying that of course I should be educated, but that my father was 'so unreasonably opposed to it'; while he declared with equal firmness that only 'consideration' for my mother made him hesitate; that there was nothing he more greatly desired than to see me established in some distant boarding-school, but that he knew my mother 'would damn well never hear of it.' At this stage she always said she *would* hear of it; that he had only to express the wish and I should start that very day; not just soon, mind you, but that very day! This violence of prospective speed shivered the dear old man (as I assume my mother had known it would), and he hastily observed that perhaps it would be better to put off my going until the spring, summer, autumn, or winter, as the case might be, because of the peculiar unpleasantness of the present season. After which he blushed, and looked rather ferocious; even the most innocent deceptions being foreign to his nature.

It is doubtful if my education would ever have

progressed beyond this stage had not my grandmother taken the matter in hand. As before mentioned, she was a resolute woman. Despite her eighty years and odd, she packed up her household, carved bedsteads, what-nots, Art Union of London prizes, silk-shaded canaries, innumerable tea-sets, and all, and with them crossed seas and continents; finally coming to rest in the green-streeted mountain-town of Toowoomba, her physical frailty preventing her from venturing farther into the hot heart of Queensland. All this she did in order that she might realize the dream of having her darling with her; I being, as aforementioned, the apple of her autocratic old eye.

'*Such* a child,' wrote she, 'must have all the advantages that a select and careful education can bestow.' (As I was certainly not endowed by nature with a physical charm upon which much reliance could be placed, I perhaps needed these select advantages more than even my grandmother realized.)

But these things took place in the early summer, and it was finally decided that I should leave at the summer's end; when Billy, my staunchest ally, unintentionally precipitated my going. For Billy was a dreamer. He always said that a man couldn't 'think' while he worked, not at work that took brains; but despite the mental strain of hammering his little pieces of iron, Billy dreamed. And I had come to the heyday of dream-time. Behind me

were the piratic and bloody exploits of imagination common to most innocent children, and I was drunk with poetry, with the gay pagan myths of Greece and Rome, and the dark, beautiful legends of the North. I had read them and re-read until they were a very part of me; at first content with the classical stories, after a while I began to alter and improvise for my own delight. Now, mounted on a white steed lithe with strength, my golden helmet gleaming among purple storm-clouds, I bore some young and noble warrior (who usually bore a pronounced likeness to Jerry, now that I come to think of it) up to the clanging halls of Valhalla. Now, suitably altered to personate a white nymph, I stole down to some blue forest pool just flecked with moonlight, scorning the homage of the little goat-footed, scuffling gods, there to await the coming of a shepherd lover. Of love, love, love, I dreamed, love pagan and simple, clothed in all the wonder of silver nights, green forests, and the rich flame of sunset. Love wild with perfume, decked with marigolds and pink roses, offering delight as the red-gold cornfield offers itself to the sun. The wild-sweet love of a younger and more simple world, of high adventure, of the Fleet-footed Ideal . . . all these far emotions became concrete in an immeasurable abhorrence of work.

It shocked me that any people should have to work until their hands were reddened and beauty had gone away; to work all life long, and never

have time to hear the sweetness of blue-hilled romance that ran in the operas; in old tales; that flowered in the almond tree. All this I felt was very wrong . . . which it was; but it must be admitted that I had much the same sort of feeling when I was asked to wash the milk things, instead of going out with Jerry or my father. Romance seemed to my young mind to have been banished from the world and my unhappy life, by work. Indeed, work in all its manifestations shocked me at this time. It also shocked Billy. When we discovered this bond, we felt closer together than ever, and I used to sit on the great bellows in the brown dusk of the blacksmith's shop, and watch the little spots of sunlight that fell through the nail holes in the iron roof and lay on the ground like golden coins; or lit, in passing, Billy's stubbly whiskers that wiggled while Billy read to me.

He read me much that I did not understand, from heavy economic books dealing with endless statistics; but he read also passages afire with the world's injustice, aglow with the fervour of the men who wrote them; and descriptions that shook one, as did mighty music, of that which men might be in some future day; the visioning of a simpler and more gracious world, where love was, and beauty . . . also there did not seem to be a troublesome amount of work about. Billy and I talked much of this world-to-be-on-earth. . . . Then Aunt Austace came. Aunt Austace was terribly angular

— and good; and she knew she was good, and thought she was slight, and her white hair was coiled in a beautiful bun on her neck, and she said that for a girl of my age short curls were unwomanly, and breeches and leggings disgusting. She was my mother's only sister, and when my mother married, Aunt Austace had received the money that had been hers, and this, in addition to Aunt Austace's own income, gave her just enough to go on indefinitely getting gooder and more angular.

She talked and thought much of 'saving the heathen,' which must, I think, make one beautifully complacent, for not only do you know for certain that you are better than about three quarters of the human race, but that you are doing your best for them. I tried to think what saving people in millions must feel like . . . Aunt Austace told us of all the shiny little black girls now wearing red-and-white 'slips,' wholly through her agency, and, although she did not say it in so many words, we knew that before she had taken a hand *they hadn't worn any 'slips' at all*; for she said that living as we did, cut off from the great world, we could not realize *how* badly they had needed them. We also gathered that they took some keeping in the slips after they had got them. In fact, Aunt Austace had to go out, at least once a year, to the numerous islands where the slips were in process of distribution, to see that the local teachers and

missionaries had not been so melted and mosquito-bitten as to grow lethargic about it.

Sometimes the bareness that greeted her must have been dreadful, for she could not describe it to us save by raising her hands and groaning. (She groaned beautifully.)

But this vigilance was by no means the end of her good works; she was at the time tracing the missing husband of a certain seamstress, to whose bosom she was determined to restore him, in defiance of his wishes (and also, as it appeared, the seamstress's). The woman had, in a rash moment, set Aunt Austace working, and then tried to stop her; which was vain. That was why Aunt Austace was in the West, for after two years of relentless inquiry she discovered that the missing husband had for a time been shearing on the Warrego.

'The woman actually came to me,' said Aunt Austace, 'and thanked me for all the trouble I was taking, but said that her husband had only drunk her savings and knocked her about when he was there, and that he had left her a week after they were married, anyway . . .' Aunt Austace looked about at us. 'I said, "Am I to understand that you sanction his absence?" She said she didn't know . . . that he was a very brutal man. I simply said, "You should have thought of that before you married him, my good woman," and she said that she hadn't known it until she had. That,' admitted Aunt Austace, 'was reasonable in a way. But I

said, "We can't let things like knocking about influence us, or where would marriage be?" She couldn't answer, and just said, well, she thought he wouldn't come. I said, "Let *me* find him and we'll see about that" . . .'

All this rather impressed me, but when I told Jerry, he said that when you saw what life had done to some of us it made you afraid; and Billy called Aunt Austace 'a social parasite,' and said that she had never done 'a decent day's work' in her life. (Considering what Billy's and my views on work were, it seemed to me vaguely inconsistent to condemn her on that ground.) But all this is merely a prelude to the tragedy that followed.

One night, when it was very hot, and the little clouds went tumbling over the moon, we sat beneath the old vine trellis, and Aunt Austace said:

'Well, I suppose you people have your troubles too.' (She had just been telling us about the unbelievable difficulty of making the brown and bare keep their slips mended, even where it was most necessary they should be whole.) 'These socialists and fellows . . . they ought to be imprisoned.' I grew cold, for I felt that if Aunt Austace said much I was in honour bound to defend Billy, or betray innumerable tin pigs and noble sentiments. 'They are no better than low pickpockets, men utterly without morality . . .' said my aunt, and the moon lit the end of her nose with a little winky light.

Normally I had as soon been hurled to a raven-

ing lion as have contradicted Aunt Austace, but her moonlit nose was somehow so righteous, and I loved Billy . . .

'Aunt Austace,' I said, rising to my feet and speaking in a quavering voice, 'please don't talk about something you don't understand. Many of my friends are socialists,' I added largely, 'and I can't have them insulted.'

Aunt Austace regarded me for a long minute; then, 'You impertinent whipper-snapper,' she said. 'For two pins I'd put you across my knee.' There was a certain resolute and admirable quality in Aunt Austace, Billy and Jerry to the contrary, and I fully expected her to do it.

'As a matter of fact,' I cried, beginning to go at the knees, but determined to be loyal to my creed, 'you're a *social parasite*.' This visibly staggered even Aunt Austace, and I followed up my advantage. 'You haven't even borne children,' I said, depriving her, as woman, of the one justification for existence allowed by economists. In the light of riper experience I realized that as Aunt Austace was unwedded this neglect of duty would not afflict her with its full magnitude. Still she threw up her hands to her face and screamed.

'In my sister's house . . . Oh, Israel . . .'

'Joan,' said my mother, and she spoke in the voice which she used for cockroaches and my hours of darkest transgression, 'go to your room, you are impossible . . . the sooner you leave for school the better.'

'But I couldn't let her speak like that!' I cried explanatorily; 'it wasn't *true* . . .'

'Oh!' said Aunt Austace, 'I've misjudged the heathen . . . we have savages at home!' Aunt Austace was a dutiful and virtuous woman, but at that moment she was to me as Moby Dick to Captain Ahab.

'What right,' I asked in a voice trembling with fury, and still deriving my inspiration from the whiskered and socialistic Billy, 'what right have you to condemn those who differ from your class-bound opinions? To assume that you speak with the voice of God? To . . . to' — I felt myself that this was a falling-off — 'to go jamming nice comfortable little brown babies into ugly slips, just because *you* like them . . .' Whack! Whack! Whack! I received, for the first time in my life, a series of rapid, firmly applied smacks from my mother's hand upon either slightly prominent ear. Oh, the injustice of it! The bitter, flaming ignominy! Aunt Austace could say what she liked, and I must just sit and listen to her, 'or be flogged and flayed before her gloating eyes.'

'Cruel devils!' I shrieked, and then I turned and bolted, feeling that I would surely die, and hoping it.

Out through the varied moonlight, onto one of the old red roads; and away! My heart swelled with martyrdom, my eyes were half blind with tears, my smitten ears aflame. I would never go

back, never! I had better be dead (of that I was sure), and yet I clung with human tenacity to the conviction of my own courageous and shining innocence. 'To have kept silence had been base!' I muttered by way of moral support as I ran panting between the ebony and silver of the dim trees. And the little clouds still tumbled over the moon and made for it a moving halo of faint golden-pink, but all their beauty was gone for me. Presently I left the road and plunged down one of the dusty sheep pads through a dense belt of young mulga; and flung myself at last in a patch of shadow at the foot of a silver-leaved beefwood. My breath came strainingly, and I was trembling and shaken and raging. I wished that I was part of the hard red earth between the beefwood roots, and I wept with my face against the earth; my tears made a little patch of red mud, and it stuck to my wet cheeks and got into my sobbing mouth, and at intervals I bit it, wishing it Aunt Austace. However, I had been true; if I did die it was in a noble cause. If the millennium ever came it would be over 'the trampled bodies' of such as I.

When it was quite late, and I had cried until the mud puddle was a little swamp, I began to feel thirsty, and I threaded my way through the shadowy scrub to the edge of the cane-grass. Wading out through the shallow water, until it reached my knees, I stooped and drank, and drank, and splashed my face and close-cropped curls.

Then, feeling rather uncertain of my leggined legs, I sat down on a fallen log in the little island of shadow beneath a small yarron . . . and all beyond lay the flood of moonlight; tender blue water, greyish-green swamp grass, and on a dead tree a white heron, standing sentinel over the great stillness of the sleeping swamp — gleaming, white and beautiful, against the sky from which the little clouds had gone now. Beauty tremendous in the night. . . . But to-night the awful indifference of it terrified me . . . the heron would be just as white and wonderful if I were dead a thousand times; there would be as many stars; and I crouched shivering on the log, like a desolate small bullfrog, until I heard a horse coming down through the trees. Sitting very still in my patch of shadow, I waited, and presently out into the moonlight rode Jerry on his big grey horse, both looking rather weary from a long day's work. The white heron rose with a startled cry, and the horse drank with loud sniffs.

'Jerry,' I called feebly, much worn with trouble.

'Little Comrade?' he questioned in sharp surprise, peering into the moon-radiant swamp, for I was quite hidden by the yarron shadow.

'Yes, Jerry,' I answered with a catching sob.

He rode out to me, the big grey horse throwing a broken silver reflection, as he churned his slow-footed way through the shallow water.

'Come out, Small-One,' said Jerry, halting just beyond the yarron shadow.

I tried, but my legs were more uncertain than ever.

'I can't, Jerry,' I cried despondently.

So he jumped into the water with a laugh, took me in his arms and set me up in front of the saddle; then, mounting, he put his free arm round me, and the old grey splashed slowly out of the swamp again.

'Whatever's the matter?' he asked, laughing; and he felt very warm and comforting, so I leant my head on his shoulder and told him, and though he seemed smitten with strange convulsions he tightened his arm about me, and — 'Poor little nipper,' he whispered. 'But you were rather *awful*, you know, Joan Jerington.'

'Oh, Jerry, it was so *cruel* of my mother!' I cried. 'I love her so, and if it was wrong I didn't know . . . and — and she spoke just as if I was a cockroach, and she . . . she struck me dreadful blows on the ears, Jerry.' I saw nothing humorous in this; to me it was stark tragedy, but Jerry was silently convulsed again; which rather hurt me.

Then he said with whimsical tenderness, 'There are two ways of looking at everything, Sweet . . . I'd apologize to Aunt Austace and your mother if I were you.'

'But it was so *cruel*, Jerry; she can't love me at all . . .'

'Little Comrade,' said he, laughing face looking down at me in the moonlight, 'if you get through life without hurting the people who love you, and whom you love . . .' He paused, 'Well, you will be as lucky as you are little, and that's quite absurdly small.'

The old horse plodded along through the silver and grey and velvet black of the moonlit scrub, and snoofed loudly when a grey rabbit darted across the road, for he liked to pretend that he was a nervy young beast; and I snuggled against Jerry and felt warmth and infinite comfort. Presently I told him of the further disaster that had befallen —

'Jerry, they are sending me away to school very soon . . . before the autumn.'

'That,' said he, 'is a disaster that I can't face with equanimity; it's simply too horrible.'

CHAPTER VIII

Of Wonder

I apologized to Aunt Austace, but it didn't seem to do much good. She kissed me coldly, and said she had always held that Parents were responsible for their children, but that the burden laid upon some seemed, to her, unduly heavy. She then gave me a little book entitled 'Christian Hopes,' mentioning that it had sweetened the lives of cannibal chiefs, and painted head-hunters, not to mention certain hibiscus-crowned dancing girls of horrid morality, and that she *hoped* it might do something for me.

Then she packed eleven dozen red and white 'slips,' fourteen cases of Bibles wrapped in chemises (the Bibles, not the cases), and, ascertaining that the seamstress's lost husband had gone to that land whence even Aunt Austace could not retrieve him — a bullock waggon having passed over his intoxicated slumbers — she left for the back blocks of Polynesia. The man's escape was probably the one serious reverse of her life. She said we must all give way in the presence of Death, and should do so with humility, but from the ruminant fire in her eye I judge she found it difficult. As I said, my apology did little good. My mother remained firm in the matter of my departure, although my father

said that a sudden change of climate in summer was highly dangerous, and, when this failed, he added, out of my hearing as he thought, that it was time some one had told Aunt Austace 'God's own truth, anyway.'

'That,' said my mother, 'does not matter; Joan treated my only sister and our guest with utter discourtesy.' It was the first time that I had looked at it in this light, and for the first time I felt ashamed. 'And because she has a facility for being ridiculously funny, even when she is outrageous, is no reason for letting her go on.'

This also was new light, to have dared all for principle, and to hear that your sacrifice had been 'ridiculously funny,' is discouraging. The grossest injustice of persecution being preferable.

'I would never have boxed her ears,' went on that shattering, maternal voice, 'richly as she deserved it, if I hadn't been having such a struggle not to laugh . . .'

I went for a little walk, my cup of bitterness being full.

They dressed me in unaccustomed clothes and hampering skirt. Then they surveyed me, sunburnt, hoydenish, and down-at-heel, and with the sublime optimism of parents they said that I looked very nice. Then, agonized, despondent, broken-hearted, they drove me away from all that I loved in the world, into the little sand-streeted sixty-mile distant train town. As we turned into

the tiny main street, in our queer high-seated old car, a goods train passed, leaving a long trail of black coal smoke, and the smell of it caught me by the throat, for it was associated with the loss of everything dear; it was years before I could smell it without the same odd catch of pain. We were to spend the night at the tiny, clean, stuffy, paper-flower-decorated hotel, and I hated it and its fat kind landlady; and tried not to cry.

After dinner Jerry came and called me to help him feed Tim, his dear huge ugly cross between a bloodhound and a cattle dog, who managed, such was the inherent dignity of his nature, to look like a lion couchant even whilst squeezed precariously onto the footboard of the car. We walked out into the private yard, and the sound of men's voices from the distant bar was very muffled, while there was a smell of warm dust, and all the stars were shining. Near the horizon hung the little crescent of the very new moon; and we watched it in silence for a while, and then I began to weep; for I was very tired and had fought with tears all day. Jerry put his arm about my shoulders and laughed at me, and then, when I was quiet again, he held me at arm's length and scolded me. It was the first time that he had ever done so. I must learn, he said, to be a girl (and here his voice softened) and not the dearest of boys. I must make them all proud of me.

'But,' I cried, 'you, you will all forget me.'

Dickie was coming home soon, and in my heart was great fear that he might take my place with Jerry; for I knew that Dickie adored him, because in all his holidays he had stood, and walked, and strained his small throat trying to speak like Jerry.

Jerry smiled in the starlight, and I caught his hands tremulously.

'You won't come to like Dickie better than me, Jerry?'

'No,' he said, and he had stopped smiling.

'Are you *sure*, Jerry?' I begged, and suddenly he put his arms about me, little thin ugly waif that I was.

'No, I am quite sure,' he answered, 'because . . .'

'Why?' I asked, trembling, hardly daring to breathe for very wonder.

'Because — I shouldn't tell you, you skeric — but I love you, Little Comrade,' he said. 'Dear, funny, wonderful little person.'

CHAPTER IX

Of Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore

As Jerry said good-bye to me at the train window, he whispered that Tim was in the dog-box. That was my one thread of comfort throughout the journey, but it did not prevent me from crying steadily for four hundred miles or so. Thus I arrived in Toowoomba, train-smutted and miserable, my nose glowingly enlarged by copious weeping; shiny-faced and generally sloppy. A rotund, jovial cabman collected me, and at my entreaty went to garner Tim from the despised confinement of the dog-box. He emerged, immense, wrathful, and high-stepping; then amid all the rumble and roar and clatter he knew where I was; out through the clustered luggage and scattering porters he came as a hurricane, his heavy chain a lashing flail behind him. He cleared the turnstiles in a mighty spring, he seemed to ricochet from the asphalt, and the whole hundred and forty pounds of him sailed high into my arms. I clasped them about him, and we went down together. Then, as I lay upon the dusty pavement, he applied himself, with the great slobbering delight of a large-hearted dog, to the tender licking of my face and hair. I was excavated at last, but what small further damage could have been done to my appearance, Tim had accomplished . . .

We drove through the little gay streets, under endless shade trees, but so far as I was concerned we might as well have driven beneath the woeful arch of Hell. The cabman, who bore the delightful name of William Watkins, and had something of the wholesome goodness of ripe apples about him, did his best to cheer my wilted melancholy, but I merely regarded him with a fishy, lifeless eye, and felt that my youth was left behind me. We drove towards the Range, and entered at last a long green avenue of camphor laurels that wound its way up to a great house, half buried in trees. Rounding the western front we drew up to a flight of wide steps, as down them came a rare and lovely old lady. Small, frail, imperious, head and shoulders frosted with a fine cream lace shawl; a beautiful expectation lighting the old eyes; thus might have glowed the eyes of Solomon as Sheba brought him homage. I descended awkwardly from the lofty cab, and stood draggedly before her. Astonishment held her frozen for a long minute, then into her seemingly transparent, finely lined face came unbelief; I extended one shaking brown hand.

'How do you do, Grandmother,' I mumbled. Awful certainty dawned in the old lady's eyes.

'Matilda,' she called sharply, and swayed as she stood. An angular yellow person dashed to her support.

'Oh! Matilda!' said Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore, in the tone of one who sees a last il-

lusion shattered, and, between the rosy cabman and the angular person, she was borne slowly up the steps. As they vanished, I heard the lady, who answered to the formidable name of Matilda, exclaim —

'She's not strong enough for shocks like that.' ('She' obviously being my grandmother, I could entertain little doubt as to the identity of the 'shock.')

'Yes, ma'm, no, Miss Jenyns,' agreed the cabman, and then, because men are naturally more kindly liars than women, he added, 'But she's a uncommon *nice* little girl when you get to know her, ma'm!' (Considering the fishiness with which I had stared at him, this was little short of noble.) Tim had wound his chain securely about my legs, and I made no attempt to free myself, but collapsed on the lowest step, and gave way to a crowning cataract of tears. I was not over-sensitive, nor was I proud, but even for the naturally modest it is a bitter thing to find that you have smitten your own grandmother hip and thigh, as it were.

Presently the angular lady returned and pounced on me with a suddenness which I tried to think I should get used to.

'You have,' she remarked, 'given your grandmother a turn. Neither her heart nor her liver is built for that sort of thing. You must be careful.'

She apparently perceived Tim for the first time.

'What,' she asked, '*is* he? A cross between a panther and a cow?'

'No, Cousin Matilda,' I answered brokenly, and unknowingly repeating an immemorial joke. 'He's only a dog.'

'You can't,' she said, 'tell me that animal is pure dog — there's a blot on his family scutcheon somewhere or I'm much mistaken' — her eyes had suddenly twinkled. 'Well, stop wearing the beast's chain for gaiters, and come with me. Jakes!' A melancholy youth dragging a rake appeared from a clump of lilac. 'Take Miss Joan's little doggie and tie him in the shed,' said she, and her hand dropped for a second onto Tim's broad head.

Jakes looked dubiously at the hundred and forty pounds of doggie, but then, encountering Miss Jenyns's eye, he began to lead him away. At least he sledged him away, Tim remaining resolutely seated. Their progress was slow, but the fall of the ground being steep and in favour of the melancholy Jakes, they finally vanished round the flowering-syringas. I followed my cousin into the house of the grandmother whose liver I had been assured was not constructed to withstand me.

There was a dim impression of long swaying curtains, busts of large-eyed, apparently unattired ladies, discreetly terminated at their copious bosoms; and of a strange still scent of lavender and amber-tinted age. Dim golden radiance gleamed from old brocaded chairs, from old brass, from

curtained sunlight touching polished floors. I was taken into a great pink-and-grey room, and for the first time in my life I saw flowered wall-paper and flowered chintz. My enormous bed was frilled and flounced and unbelievable with pale pink taffeta, and the eiderdown a smother of pink roses; real roses bloomed in countless little pink china vases banded with silver; roses unnumbered rioted under foot. My lamp was a lady with white powdered hair and wonderful pink crinoline; by a grey velvet chair were a pair of pink satin slippers, and across the arm hung a pink satin quilted dressing-gown. When Cousin Matilda had gone, I sat down, very carefully, on the edge of the pink taffeta bed and felt a consuming pity for my grandmother. Small wonder that when you had prepared such a room — for me! you would show some signs of emotion. I felt inclined to cry a little from Grandmother's point of view, having about exhausted the tear-provoking possibilities of my own; and then I fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

Of Buttered Toast

Next morning, through a screen of wine-coloured Japanese-plum trees, I stepped onto the edge of the Range. Eight hundred feet below me the mists were just breaking up from the purple valley floor; shreds of finely ascending gold and tenderest pink, quivering, stirring banks of silver, parting to reveal deep blue and purple of fathomless shadow; ruby touching the peaked wall of the northern mountains; and to the east the hill-waves running on and on to meet the sun. A great noiseless drama of colour. I had never before seen even low hills, and I stood beneath the wine-leaved plum trees very reverently, my feet well apart, forgetting for the moment that I was cold and hungry, and afraid of my grandmother and Cousin Martha Matilda. I stood there until the rising sun struck through the red leaves about me and spattered blots of wine-coloured light on my bare arm as it lay along a smooth-barked branch; and I held a white daisy flower that I had picked against a sunlit leaf, and watched it become a pink daisy, then —

'It is very lovely, Martha,' came a decisive old voice. 'Martha, that's the *fourth* black-eyed Susan you've put your great foot on.'

I watched from the shelter of the plum tree; my

grandmother was coming slowly across the lawn, with her gaunt straw-coloured attendant. The old lady was upright as a reed, but she walked very carefully, and about the aristocratic old face was the froth of a Shetland shawl. Her hands, one of which held an ebony cane, were covered by black mittens, probably the only ones of their kind in all Queensland that sunny morning. The early sunlight streamed on them both, beautiful old woman and plain younger one; but it was at Cousin Martha's face that I looked, for it shone with a protective tenderness that transformed the pinched features, while her 'great foot' seemed to smooth the very grass before the old feet that were hesitant, though haughty. I did not know it, but I was looking on the flaming, self-consuming devotion of a life. They halted before a bed of pale narcissus, and Cousin Martha produced two little baskets and two pairs of scissors, and then she stepped out across the bed and began to cut the flower-heads from the centre, while the old lady cut about the edge. At first I wondered why my energetic cousin cut so slowly and fumblingly, but then I saw that she was letting Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore cut two flowers to her one.

'Butter fingers!' said the old lady presently. 'My basket is almost full.'

'Well, I'm sure that I can't be any faster,' answered Cousin Martha, and she cut more slowly than ever. At the end of the bed nearest to my

plum tree was a rare orange flower; it was some yards in from the edge of the lawn, and hidden from the old lady by a lilac bush. The younger woman moved down the bed, glanced sharply over her shoulder, then deftly lifted the flowering bulb, and to my astonishment replanted it near the lawn edge.

'Look, dear,' she called, rising to her feet, 'the new narcissus is in bloom.'

My grandmother came hastening with her little flower basket. 'Leave it for me to pick, Martha,' she said; 'you'd more than likely break it.' She gathered the glowing flower from amongst blue-grey leaf ribbons, and laid it on top of her basket. In its original position it would have been beyond the reach of trembling mittened fingers.

'Well, Matilda,' said the old lady suddenly (I found that she used the name 'Matilda' in moments of emotion), 'I suppose we must go and see if the child is awake.'

Cousin Martha took her arm, and the old lady sighed.

'In all my eighty years, Martha, I have only once permitted myself the folly of much expectation,' said she. 'And that was over Joan — at my age I should have known better; but I am punished, Matilda, punished! "Whom He loveth He chasteneth."'

Cousin Martha stooped to pick up a fallen narcissus flower, but I thought that her lips twitched

in a smile. Here I realized that I had been guilty of what the romances in which I revelled described as 'gross eavesdropping,' and emerged shamefacedly from the wine-coloured plum trees. As my eyes met Cousin Martha's, a sudden painful blush surged up her face; perhaps because of the orange narcissus. The lawns were silver and gold with sunlit dew, faint blue-white mist still hung beneath the fir trees, and the morning may have dealt gently with my small brown face, though more likely it was simply that, once on her guard, my grandmother was a courageous old lady; at least she greeted me with never a twinge.

'Good-morning, my dear,' she said; 'I am sorry that I was indisposed when you came yesterday, I frequently have attacks of that sort — do I not, Martha?' But her lieutenant kept silence. 'Did you have something nice for your tea, my child?' asked the old lady.

'I went straight to sleep, Grandmother, thank you.'

'What! You haven't had anything since you came? Martha, what were you thinking of?' The ebony stick tapped angrily against the gravel path.

Cousin Martha could probably have answered with truth, then, as at any other time, 'Of you.' But she said quietly, 'The child was very tired, and I thought that she was better sleeping.'

But the old lady was angry.

'A nice way to treat Marcus's daughter . . . you should sink through the floor with shame, Matilda.' (As Cousin Martha was at the moment standing upon the crust of the globe, this seemed to me extreme.) 'What ever will Marcus think? . . . I don't suppose you would care if a guest died in my house, Martha! Oh, no!' She moved down the path, black silks and creamy shawl and smooth white hair all bright with sun; the narcissi nodding in the little basket. I ran after her and put my hand on her arm.

'Grandmother, it was not Cousin Martha's fault; I said that I couldn't eat anything . . . don't be angry with her . . .'

There is perhaps nothing in the world more bitter than to hear a stranger pleading in our behalf for justice from the beloved. But I was very little and very ignorant. The old lady's face was pink and she shook her head obstinately; I continued to disport where an angel would not have gone tiptoe.

'Cousin Martha did not mean ——' A hand, strong to the point of pain, caught my arm and guided me behind the flustered Shetland shawl. My cousin did not speak, but I abdicated the rôle of peacemaker, then and for ever.

We went in to breakfast, a meal very strange and fairylike to me, used only to the rough plenty of station tables. The white gleaming cloth almost touched the polished floor, and was edged by a deep

frosting of fine lace. My grandmother brushed it softly with a mittened hand.

'It was made by your Great-Aunt Beatrice two hundred years ago. She was hurt in the hunting field as a girl and had to lie all her life in bed; this was how she amused herself.' She lifted the cloth edge displaying the wonder of its patterning. 'And this ——' She touched a cobwebby centre piece. Old silver, flashing, shimmering glass, rose satin tea cosies, overclouded with rare lace, and trimmed with satin roses, each dainty, frilly overdecorated absurdity or quaint article of beauty in the room had its history, and frail mittened hands displayed them with pride. On the carved oak sideboard stood rare rose glass goblets caught in silver, and tubby jugs bearing the names of Wedgwood and Spode, finely worked baskets of creamy china rubbed shoulders with green jade gods, brought out of the East by Great-Grandfather General Jerington-Whatmore a hundred years ago. To the child of an almost traditionless civilization, whose families possess few relics, whose dreams are of the future, and particularly to me who had never known a very old lady before, it was all strange, and rare, and rather wonderful. Indeed, though I lived for nearly four years with my grandmother, she never became quite real to me; was always as a tender legend interwoven with the coloured window panes of Saint Agnes' Eve, and all tales of 'ages long ago.'

The sunlight lay across the breakfast table and touched the thin cream china cups, so that the clear tea, with its floating slice of lemon, cast its amber through their sides. The big silver bowl, filled with pale pink roses, glinted into green and mauve, and the tender flower petals showed their faint veining in the sparkling light; until Cousin Martha drew the rose silk curtains across the window, and then the pink roses turned red in a soft glow. At the head of the table sat the old lady, a black lace mantilla thrown over her shoulders, and her white hair dressed high above her warm frail face; Cousin Martha leant over to butter her toast.

'If you *please*, Martha,' said my grandmother, raising a mittened hand, 'I would like Joan to butter my toast to-day — you see,' she added reasonably, 'you have buttered it for so *many* years.'

I came to her side, and with trembling brown fingers I broke the toast into little pieces, and on each spread a tiny curl of butter.

The sallow woman had given the all of life; I offered but one gift — change.

'Some people,' said my grandmother once, opening and shutting a fan of black Spanish lace, 'some people, my dear, are born to be loved, some to be hated, and some — well, simply to be sat on like an upholstered suite.' (In the latter category I think she must have placed Cousin Martha.)

We rose from the breakfast table.

'To-morrow,' said the old lady, 'I will select Joan's governess. Governesses are necessary evils like the measles and whooping cough, although on the whole less attractive. Give me your arm, Joan, child.'

Cousin Martha followed us, and perhaps — for she was an introspective woman — she wondered how many of her home-keeping, devoted sisters might, had they listened closely throughout the years, have heard that protest, often-unuttered, of husband or child or loved one: 'You have buttered it for so *many* years.'

At least, when I looked back at her, there were tears in her eyes.

CHAPTER XI

Of Bonnets and To-Morrow

Juliet to the contrary, there is a great deal in a name — particularly if hyphenated. My grandmother used the combination of Jerington-Whatmore naturally as she despised her fellowmen, and assumed that she was one of 'God's chosen daughters.' (From the plural she doubtless believed that there were others, but so far as I could gather from her worldly reminiscences, she had never met them.) My father discarded the Jerington save in play, just as he took off his old panama hat to let the sun shine on his thick-curled grey hair and laughed on a nice morning. While my mother had, I think, a hidden weakness for the hyphen, but could not indulge it, for she had so often told us that she 'had some sense,' and really sensible women don't bother about such things.

But to return to my grandmother. As Mrs. Jerington-Whatmore she established herself in the great house on the Range and proceeded to astonish the old ladies whom she received by the variety of her china, the polished serenity of her snobbery, and the excellence of her cakes.

'This afternoon I shall be at home,' said she, some weeks after my arrival. 'You will wear your new dress, Joan, the brown velveteen, and you may help to pass tea.'

I thought afterwards that with just such a gleam in their eyes and in such tones might the ladies of old Rome have said —

'Put on your new mantle, Clarice, my love, we are toasting a few martyrs in the lotus garden at four.'

But I wore my new brown velveteen, my grandmother was 'at home,' and there came to her tea-table numberless old ladies in black and jet who looked as if they had been born only out of consideration for an unworthy world, but wouldn't have done it if they had known how unworthy it really was; haughty old ladies these, with black pompons in their bonnets and black silk gloves. There came also certain fat old ladies with artificial flowers in their little toques, and grey or yellow gloves, old ladies who looked as if they would have got on very nicely with the world if it had only let them. I discovered later that they were periodically butchered by the old ladies in jet and pompons, not to make a Roman holiday, but a Toowoomba 'at home.'

When all the old ladies were established — the little fat old ladies with the artificial flowers in the most uncomfortable chairs — I helped 'pass tea' in tiny jade Chinese cups with two tiny handles right at the bottom. The old ladies in black took them as if they had drunk from childhood out of rare and ancient Chinese tea-cups that no one could hold; but the little old ladies with the artificial flowers

were visibly shaken. One of them, whom I discovered to be the mother of a rich butcher, a butcher so rich that Toowoomba could almost but not quite forget his disgracefully intimate relations with the breakfast chop, said beamingly, 'Ain't they pretty little tumblers!' Whereat all the old ladies in black raised their eyebrows slightly, and the other old ladies with flowers tittered, and the very fat little old lady with the puce leather camellias in her bonnet, who had spoken, began to take water at the seams as it were.

'I always did like China things,' she said. 'Only yesterday I bought a basin with dragons on it that was in Gobel and Giblets' window; it was very reasonable, it were.' She looked wildly round the circle of elevated eyebrows, just as one of the leanest and blackest old ladies screened a genteel hint at a yawn. The little very fat old lady had now reached the stage where she wanted to stop talking but couldn't.

'I'm sending it to little Molly Henderson for a wedding present; it looks like something real expensive——' She plunged into a last desperate confidence that should have melted a heart of stone.

'My niece Molly *will* be interested,' said the old lady who had yawned.

The little fat old lady gave a faint gasping sound, and then she foundered, there before us all, and the conversational waves closed over her puce camellias.

The old ladies in pompons chatted decorously amongst themselves, pausing at intervals to polish off an old lady in artificial flowers and yellow gloves; it seemed to me a doubtful pleasure from the victim's standpoint, but I suppose that they must have snatched some watery solace from it, for they had endowed schools and churches and organized bazaars innumerable for the privilege.

The old amber damask curtains threw a strange faint-gold glow over the big drawing-room, with its rich brown and amber carpet with the slight hints of peacock blue; its gold brocade chairs, very worn but extremely elegant; yellowed engravings of powdered-haired ladies and large-eyed stags . . . Golden lights touched the pale-iced cream-piled splendour of the cakes, and the little green jade tea-cups gave an odd clear note to the dim brown-gold gloom. But strangest of all were the little old ladies themselves. The light brushed heavy coiled white hair, sparse grey locks, tight-screwed, little decorous black frills, little tightly held black handbags, little bowed shoulders, and old shoulders rigidly straight. It lit withered lips and sharply gleaming black eyes and more gentle glances of faded blue; and they chirruped together like so many strange small birds, preparing for migratory flight — which, after all, they were; for all the long pageant of life was behind them, with its fruit blossom of youth, its storms, its agony, its splendour of noon, and they were left for just a

little while to chirrup in the gold sunset. Very strange and whimsical and comically sad the way they pecked each other — and the setness of their little old-lady ideas. They had loved and been loved and tasted the bitter-sweet of life-giving, had agonized over the death of love and the death of life, and now they sat in the amber glow and chirruped and fed and pecked, before flight — none knew whither.

In one corner a discussion of crochet patterns progressed.

'It was a most refined design. I *hesitated* when Miss Martin asked me for it, but, as she seemed to be a lady of true birth and position, I did not like to refuse ——'

'No, one is so often asked for one's patterns by people that you don't in the least care to lend to . . .'

'Well, accepting Miss Martin at her face value I lent her the wild rose one, and — would you believe it — next week it was reproduced in the "Chronicle."'

The old ladies could hardly credit such an outrage. But they were assured that it had taken place. They agreed that it indeed proved the necessity of even greater caution than they had previously exercised in the disposal of their crochet patterns. One of them said that to be forewarned was to be forearmed. Here an old lady with velvet marigolds in her toque ventured to say that you

often saw nice patterns in the papers; she was told that the old ladies with black pompons did not care to use patterns that had been in the public press, they liked their patterns to be exclusive, thank you! The old lady who hadn't minded whether her patterns were exclusive or not blushed violently, and pretended that she wanted to sneeze.

In another corner the question was debated of what one would do if placed in the painful position of having to reside on an uninhabited island with only *one* relic of civilization — only *one*. What would your choice of this one thing be? Could it be anything at all? Yes, *anything*: the cruel fate that placed you on the isle would apparently in this be lenient, you could take any *one* thing, with you, from the world. Most of the old ladies, after careful thought, made the discreet choice of a Bible — which proved both their propriety and piety; a few would take their lapdog or canary; one old lady wanted her knitting. A discussion then arose as to whether knitting was 'one' thing, and, if it were, whether it was a wise choice . . . of course you could go on knitting it over and over.

'And what would you take, Miss Jenyns?' asked a little old lady who was just like the Strawberry Girl, of my Cousin Martha.

'A man!' said my Cousin Martha decisively.

'Matilda!' said my grandmother.

The subject was changed to the safer one of plain walls or patterned. The tea passing ended, I

slipped out unnoticed; the gold of evening was filling the great half-ruined gardens, bounded by their twenty-foot hedges, rank from lack of clipping. Two drives led up to the house, the one lined with camphor laurels up which the jovial cabman had brought me, and a dark tunnel of pines, leading to big front gates with the drifted leaves of half a generation piled against them. From here one could look out across the dip of the town to the west, and here, heartsick with longing for the West Country, I used to sit and twist my thin arms about the tall iron bars and think them my prison windows. But across the little used, red-rutted road was a vacant allotment, some acres in extent, which filled my less despondent moments with keenest excitement, for to it came regularly a youth and a maid in the evening time. Very young they were, and very much in love; a commonplace-looking pair, and shabbily dressed, but to me, love-hungry and lonely, they seemed divine. They came to the allotment after their work was finished every day, and they sat on an old gum log and planned, and planned, and planned, and at times they disagreed. Often one of them would bring a little root of some ornamental shrub, or an eyelet of bamboo, or a little tree in a pot, and they laid out groves and a fir drive, and to the west a windbreak of cypress, while by slow degrees they planted a hedge all round their block. When either brought a new plant, they would have it wrapped in newspaper

and make the other guess at what it was, and then they would argue as to where it should go, and how deep the hole should be, and when it was planted they made sure that no one was looking and then, holding hands above it, they kissed! That was how I first knew that they were not brother and sister, for when Dickie and I had planted anything together it generally ended in Dickie's throwing down the shovel and asking who was planting the thing, anyway, and my saying that, worse luck, for the plant, he was, and his inviting me to plant it myself, and our both going away and leaving it. As the two worked in the garden almost every evening, and on all the fine week-ends, they soon had a small plantation, and I, crouching amongst the dead leaves by the old iron gates, over which the little blue wild convolvulus had grown, watched their planting with interest as keen as their own: wondered what their little house would be like, and when they would be married, and if some day they would sit their first baby on the grass and kiss above its head as they kissed above the little trees. Their gate was almost opposite to mine, so that when they hurried out into the red-rutted road in the dusk I could hear scraps of their talk, and almost always they said — 'To-morrow we will do so and so.'

And presently, being a very sentimental small person, I called their bit of land 'The Garden of To-morrow.' To-night they planted a white rose-

bush at one side of the little gate and as they came out, hand in hand, they said, 'To-morrow we will plant a red one on the other side,' and the last light touched their plain young faces. I walked slowly back through the pines to the house-of-old-ladies where the garden had been planted long ago, and the fruitage gathered, and to-morrow was nearly ended.

PART TWO

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

Clippings

And then with strange quickness many things had happened, and I was nearly seventeen . . . It was war-time, and for three years Jerry had been fighting in Palestine; and to me, most tragically important of all, Jerry wrote only nice, bright, eminently 'sensible' letters, with never the littlest tiny word of love. I had cried, and wondered, and puzzled over them, and had come at last to the aching conclusion that what to me had meant such wonder, had to him been merely a moment's kindly pity for an obviously worshipping child. This thought brought an anguish of shame that alternated with the ache; the net result being that I grew quite pale, and as nearly attained to the ethereal pallor of my early ambition as I was ever destined to do. I also discovered that I was a poet. From the standpoint of one's family this is probably a regrettable discovery, even if verified by facts. With me it merely resulted in long hours of rigid vacancy, which I chose to term 'meditations,' and in my walking bareheaded into the mountain fogs at various inconvenient and unusual hours, and catching most snufflesome colds in consequence.

After sufficient meditation or fog-stumbling I produced something of this sort —

'Grey is the mist, and grey my heart,
Cold the black-whispering pines,
Alas, that we should part . . .'

Here I would probably stick, trying to retain the proper poetic despondence, whilst hunting vigorously for a rhyme for 'pines'; ('lines' and 'spines' both seeming unsuitable). I also liked to sit with my arm about Tim's portly back and tell him that, although Jerry had forgotten us, we still had each other; this, however, invariably ended in Tim's tongue smacking me vigorously across neck or cheek, and his smiting me a frightful blow with an immense muddy forepaw. He never would learn to be sentimental in a nice quiet way.

I had not been home to Yallandane in all the four years since coming to live with my grandmother; for the imperious old lady had, I think, come to love me more than her jade tea-set even, and whenever the question of my holidays arose, she would say, kindly, that my longing for my own people was very natural; she would be happy to have me go, but she hoped that I would remember her, for taking into consideration her time of life it was very unlikely we should meet again. If I still showed any symptom of home-going, she added that it might please me to know what a comfort I had been to her last years, and that she had felt lately that her call had almost come. I knew that

she hadn't felt anything of the sort, and she knew that I knew, but she looked so frail and spiritual and resigned and lovely that I was just as helplessly her slave as Cousin Martha.

I walked slowly down the avenue,

> '... Alas, that we should part ...
> And yet my lonely soul divines,
> The coldness of thy written word ...'

I was getting along rather well; 'word' should not be hard to rhyme, 'bird,' 'heard,' 'third,' and 'gird,' instantly presenting themselves. Thus I walked 'languidly' through the drifting fog, towards the great disused gates. It was very dark beneath the fir trees, and they dripped in a delightfully morbid manner; in fact they were 'in tune' with my mood, and all poets know how helpful that is. Reaching the gates I leant a forehead, which I fondly imagined to be 'fevered,' against the rusty iron bars, and took mental note of the fact that they were not so cold as the bars about my heart. The mist was lighter here, and I looked out over 'The Garden of To-morrow.' The little trees were fine striplings now, the roses blooming royally, and the hedge beginning to creep up until it threatened my view ...

A year ago the boy and girl had come to it one bright morning with young faces rather pale, and rather proud, and they had sat on the old gum log and whispered, and whispered, and then, when they came out through the little gate, the girl was crying, and although the boy-man in his very new

khaki tried to comfort her, he sniffed suspiciously.

Now the girl worked there alone, worked hastily among the plants, and then sat knitting on the log, and sometimes she cried. I felt both sorry for her and jealous of her, for although she was lonely she was always reading chubby letters, and from the way in which she kissed them I assumed that they were not bright and sensible. I composed quite a lot of poems about her and the boy, and the Garden. But she was not my only interest at the old gate; morning and evening there passed a tawny-haired boy of about my own age, with a little long-bodied, short-legged, bouncing terrier, a delectable Scotch terrier, with whiskers. Sometimes there was a stately old gentleman with them; an immense rigid old gentleman who bowed to me with great courtliness. It was he who first spoke to me.

'Good-morning, me lass,' he said in a voice that seemed to roll up from the hills. 'Do ye hear the poipes?'

I listened and from the distant town I heard a faint erratic squealing.

'Yes,' I answered, blushing.

'Do ye loike them?' he asked, stroking his white beard.

'No, but I . . . I have never heard them very well,' I stammered. (I was not what my grandmother called 'a polished conversationalist,' nor had I 'deportment.')

The old gentleman flushed and swelled and rum-

bled — 'Not loike them? Why, there's the rollin' o' the mists, and the upheavin' o' th' purple hills, an' the marchin' o' the clans in 'em.' And he bowed and marched on.

After that the boy always stopped to talk to me through the gate, a nice, sunny, tawny boy, who reminded me of Dickie. His talk was very manly, and while he knew that I was looking he was very firm with the whiskered terrier. But one day when I stepped back into the hedge and he did not see me, he pulled a cotton reel out of his manly pocket and dangled it for the little dog in a disgracefully childish way.

To-night I arrived at the gate just as he was leaving it; he came back with eager eyes and a manly expression.

'Good-evening, I was afraid I'd missed you,' he said. 'We've had an awful rush at the Bank to-day; still a man must expect that sort of thing at times. Some of the young chaps don't like it . . .' he added, as though he had long outgrown such unreasonable frame of mind.

'Care for chocs?' he added, negligently pulling a small red box from his pocket. 'I just happened to buy these coming along.'

If he was callow, so was I. I took two chocolates and then handed back the box. He wanted to give it to me, and I wanted it excruciatingly, but we were not equal to the exchange. He pocketed it, and we both looked darkly at the fog.

'Mind if I smoke?' he asked presently, with an indifference that deceived even me.

I said that I didn't mind, and after that he seemed to acquire assurance, and we talked in quite a mature way about the Western Front and aeroplane-propellers, and submarines and things.

'A lot of the generals seem to be bits of chumps,' said he with sudden ferocity. 'I say, my name is Clippington Mackenzie . . . Clippings, you know, and could I call you . . .?'

'Joan,' I said.

'It's a jolly nice name . . . and if I couldn't do better than the Russians I'd give up.'

After this intimate passage we both breathed hard for a while. Then Clippings rallied, spread his legs rather wide apart, and said, 'Get down!' very loudly to the stumpy terrier (who was down already).

'Won't you keep the chocs?' he asked, passing them back through the bars with averted head, and then, with a fearful blast of smoke, he said, in a very deep voice —

'It's wonderful the comfort a man gets from his pipe.'

But I was speechless with horror, for behind him towered the immense old gentleman who loved the bagpipes, and I knew from his expression, before ever Clippings turned, that the comfort which one man got from his pipe was unofficial.

'Clippington!' said the apparition, and the earth

shook and the hills, and Clippings seemed to dwindle and wilt.

No further word passed between them, but the old gentleman held out his hand, and into it came the glittering curly-wooded pipe. The old gentleman glared at it for a long minute, then he hurled it far over the hedge and the little trees into the Garden of To-morrow — which after all was a most appropriate place for it. And then he bowed to me, and they went away together in the mist.

CHAPTER II

Of a Magnolia (Battered)

'What parrt of Scotlan' do I come fra? Is that what ye're askin' me, lass?' Clippington's grandfather towered majestically in the last sunlight and I felt that I was guilty of some shame, but that denial was useless.

'Yes, Mr. Mackenzie,' I admitted.

The old gentleman enlarged visibly. 'Fra' the Hielans', me gal, fra the Hielans'. None o' your Lowlan' muck,' said he. Then the fire faded from his eye, and he looked at me pityingly, as if seeking to plumb the depths of my ignorance.

'Ha' ye iver seen a cricket match?' he asked.

Again I blushed for my ignominy, but cricket did not flourish in the far-scattered West, nor could Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore have been called a patron of sport. Since coming to her I had lived shut in by the great unclipped hedges; only venturing forth at rare intervals, in a slow cab driven by the jovial Watkins, to visit other stately old ladies shut in by other hedges.

'No; never,' I told him.

He shook his head sadly. 'We must see to yeir education, lass . . . perhaps if I saw yeir grandmother, now.'

He did see her, and a right stately pair they were,

and he twirled his little moustache and stroked his trimmed beard, while my grandmother stood by the mantelpiece and opened and shut an old black lace fan. But with many regrets my grandmother refused to let me go to the cricket match. The old gentleman dismissed the matter lightly, and then, about to take his departure, he stopped and raised my grandmother's hand to his lips. There was a glow of apricot coals in the grate, and on the cream mantel massed pink roses, and it might have been that the reflection of these touched my grandmother's cheeks, but I thought that the colour rose in them, and it is certain that she smiled, and in the smile I seemed to see that my grandmother had been a great beauty . . . and that she was ninety-two. She sighed:

'We women are fools from birth to death . . .' said Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore. 'Take the child, if you wish, my good sir' — one of her frail hands in their black silk mittens that smelt of lavender rested on the mantelpiece, she raised it, and drew from the silver bowl a deep-pink rose, then with the grace that she told me was 'deportment,' although her hands had grown very tremulous in the last years, she placed it in the old gentleman's buttonhole. Then she curtsied, and I wondered how on earth she did it, for, although I was gifted with the same members, I knew that I could never, though I tried a whole life long, curtsy like that. The old gentleman raised her hand again,

and then I took him back down the long drive, and he seemed oddly abstracted, while he flung his head back and fingered his rose, and, instead of leaning a little on his stick as was his wont, he snorted and twirled it in the air. For although my Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore was over ninety, she had been a royal beauty, and she remembered it — and so did you.

At the gate the old gentleman suddenly noticed me.

'I will send Clippington for you the day after to-morrow, me lass, at ten. Good-night,' he said, and bowed.

I stood in the twilight, and looked thoughtfully at my substantial brown hand. Then I sighed. And as I walked back to the house I made up a poem about the injustice of life, beginning —

'Oh, Nature, pouring all thy gifts,
Of beauty, love and bloom,
Upon thy favoured daughters' heads,
And leaving some the lonely doom . . .'

Then I gave it up, for although I *was* perhaps ugly and clumsy, I couldn't help feeling happy about the cricket match.

Clippings came for me, and I wore my new grey dress, with the tight grey cap to match, and we swung along through the bright morning. And everything was at its summer blossom-time, but there was still a freshness of spring in the air.

At the gates onto the old rutted road, we waited

for Mr. Mackenzie. The sky was blue beyond belief; the hedge was covered with little mauve-blue flowers, and blue-and-white pigeons were running about our feet. Clippings was in uniform, for he had at last won his people's consent to his 'going.' I tried not to think about it, for the day was so beautiful, and the thought of standing at the old iron gates — with Clippings gone — hurt horridly. But it was hard to forget, because Clippings felt it incumbent upon him as a soldier of the King to talk wholly of warlike matters. He criticized the tactics of the Allied generals very strongly. (I had once suggested that perhaps they knew more about it than we did, but Clippings showed his contempt for this uncritical feminine confidence.) He was convinced, in common with almost every peaceful male suburbanite in the civilized world, that he could have done better in less time than any general or admiral afloat. And he said so at great length, and demonstrated the fact on the middle fingers of each hand; while the blue-and-white pigeons ran about his feet, until the little dog, arriving at a gallop that seemed to heave him up now at one end, now at the other, frightened them away; and the sun shone on Clippings's new uniform, and his beauty, which was only the dear beauty of youth . . . For he was not handsome like Dickie, but he was decidedly, very decidedly dear . . . When the old gentleman came, we walked down the green lane, under the blue

day, to catch a yellow bus. And then at last we were at the cricket ground.

I never dared to confess it to Clippings or to the immense old gentleman, but that cricket match, as an entertainment, was one of the starkest disappointments of my life. As aforementioned, I had never seen a game of cricket, and I was ignorant as to even its most general outline. But I had read of so and so playing a 'gallant game,' hitting out 'recklessly,' and making two hundred runs 'at amazing pace,' etc. I had also seen cartoons entitled 'What it feels like to bat against the English bowling'; and there was a brave-looking man armed with a tiny bat defending himself from innumerable projectiles the size of cannon balls, hurled at him from all parts of the field. I had been under the impression that, allowing for a certain artistic exaggeration, it really portrayed the game. (So far as that goes I still feel that it would 'brighten cricket' and eliminate stonewalling to have the whole eleven bowl at the batsman simultaneously.) I thought also that a run was a complete encirclement of the ground performed by the flying batsman pursued by the hostile team, and that when he 'hit out recklessly' he at least endangered his life.

The real game was, to put it mildly, a blow. I sat through the long day on a particularly hard wooden bench, while the sun burnt my once hardened nose to flame beneath the slight shelter of the smart

grey cap. And far away, in the middle of a tremendously green field, white-clad men rolled a little ball at a little bat, from which it trickled away again. Clippings sat beside me, and he jumped and wriggled with pure and blissful excitement (for which I could see not the slightest provocation), to the accompaniment of such remarks as 'Gee-whiz, that was a corker! Hear it siz, Joan! See the twist!... A regular corkscrew...!' At times, under cover of a newspaper, his warm young hand seized mine in impulsive glee.

Still, for all my disappointment over the great game of the Empire, it was a very happy day. We ate sandwiches and drank ginger beer, while old Mr. Mackenzie talked to other old gentlemen of the days of Trumper and Grace; and of the time when the English Eleven offered to play sixteen Australian schoolboys, and the schoolboys played ducks and drakes with them because Noble and Trumper were in the school team. At last, replete with ginger beer and peanuts, and sunburnt to a turkey red, we filed towards the home-going bus. Clippings and Mr. Mackenzie were glowing with delight because the Toowoomba team had rolled the little ball about better than the Brisbane team, their challengers, and were crowned with victory.

Old Mr. Mackenzie talked amicably, even cordially with an old gentleman by the name of McLeod, whose whole clan, I gathered from Clippings,

he usually despised heartily, and characterized as the greatest rogues that 'iver came oot of Scotlan'.' He even consented to dine under the McLeod roof, and the two went off together, leaving Clippings and myself to stroll home from the bus alone. Clippings was very silent; he told me afterwards that it was because he had so many wonderful things to say. (At the time I attributed it to overindulgence in peanuts, but this merely shows that you never know.) The lane was luminous with twilight; the little sweep of hills, visible at its end, softly lilac, and there was a glow of wine away beyond the dim hollow of the town and the brown fields. Inside the gates Tim leapt and tied himself into knots that should have shamed a dog of his mature years, all because he had been separated from me for a few hours. I let him expend his first fervour through the bars, but he tried to knock me down when I finally ventured to enter. His manner was irreproachably dignified with the world at large, but where his heart was involved it wanted greatly in the genteel quality of restraint which my grandmother said was so necessary. Jerry had found him years before, a great clumsy puppy, flogged into insensibility by his bullock-driving owner. And somehow Tim had never got used to being loved; it still overwhelmed him; caresses often leaving him trembling from his great broad liver-and-white head to the end of his spotted tail.

'You abominable animal!' I cried, trying to poke him off with my parasol. 'I've only been away six hours; you're a fool, Tim.'

'I don't think so,' said Clippings, in deep, unnatural voice. 'Six hours is a long time — to be away from some people,' he added, looking at the evening sky.

We walked slowly up the drive, and Clippings broke a great pale flower from the magnolia tree. He busied himself over it for a while with a little piece of stick and a reckless sort of energy. Then, in a somewhat dishevelled state, he thrust it into my hands. Although battered, it was still pale and luminous and heavenly scented, and for a moment I noticed nothing else. Then I saw that he had written on it, and on the bruised cream velvet of the petals the characters began to shape themselves in brown.

'I love you dreadfully, Joan; would you like to give me a little kiss?'

It was deep dusk, and the great flower lay coolly in my hands and smelt of wonder. I tried to think of how Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore would have handled the situation, and had a momentary vision of her balancing the flower in a tapered ivory hand while she glanced archly over a white shoulder, and her crinoline of billowy rose silk swelled superbly . . . But what was the use? My own hand would shut into an agitated brown fist about the magnolia stalk, and my knees were going, so I said:

'No, I wouldn't!' and threw the ten-inch blossom cup at Clippings's head, and the wide petals fell slowly beside his new military boots. We stood in silence, and then Clippings sniffed — loudly: a horribly heart-melting sniff.

'I thought you might love me a little bit . . .' said he.

'Well, I don't.'

One of the magnolia petals fluttered to my feet . . . and I picked it up.

'Oh, well, I'll soon be gone now,' said Clippings, with dismal satisfaction, and he turned away down the drive . . . his new boots squeaking in the dusk.

I spread the mangled magnolia petal on my palm, and with a pine twig I wrote — '. . . because I love you — a lot.' Then I ran after him and pushed it into his hand, and left him trying to strike matches to read it.

CHAPTER III

Of Summer Daring

Five weeks later, I rested my arms on a rusty bar of the old gates, a bar that had been above my head when first I stood there. In the Garden of To-morrow the roses were still in blossom, and the feathery tops of the young cypresses swayed in the sunshine; beyond was the tree-set basin of the town; beyond that the heaving cultivated hills. And far, far beyond them, across the open farmlands of the Darling Downs, and beyond the fleshy desolation of the pear country, far, far to the west, lay the mulga. I wanted it badly to-day, with its vast hard blue sky; wanted to run down the little sheep pads, through the grey shadows, and forget everything but the feel of the dust between my toes and the whispering secrecy of the scrubs. (I observed mentally that I wanted 'to escape the burden of self,' for life seemed very complicated to my seventeen years.) I had not seen Clippings since the night of the magnolia flower, for he had been suddenly called to train in Brisbane. But he wrote me letters of endless and dear absurdity, wherein he said, amongst other things, how blindingly, wonderfully beautiful was I. This proved delightfully how much in love he, a most truthful boy, must have been . . . and you see Jerry had

never said that I was beautiful; and Jerry wrote me only oppressively, offensively sensible letters. And yet . . . But I loved Clippings very much, and Clippings wanted me to marry him! And yet . . . I leant a forehead, that really was quite satisfactorily hot, on the gate bar, and gazed with melancholy eyes across the Garden of To-morrow. It was then that I saw the girl coming. She walked very fast, but her face was quite white and set — and lost. She unlatched the gate, and went and sat on the old log in the sun, resting her hands beside her; very still. I suppose she thought, for presently the colour came hotly into her face, and she jumped to her feet and held out her arms. She stood so for a moment. Then she gave a small sound and crumpled beside the old log and cried as I had never seen any one cry.

Next week there was a 'For Sale' notice above the little gate . . . Also Clippings's terrier howled horribly every evening. I wrote to Clippings, saying that I loved him more than anything in the world, and that I would marry him . . . One dared to trust to reaching the beloved in the Garden of To-morrow . . . My grandmother despised all things appertaining to Toowoomba, but she reserved her choicest contempt for the doctors and dentists of that small and inoffensive city. Thus, when I developed a toothache, she sent me, in Cousin Martha's charge, to Brisbane.

'I do not for a moment suppose that the medi-

cos there are good,' said she. 'But, at least, never having encountered them, I am preserved from knowing *how bad* they are.'

On our arrival at the hotel, Cousin Martha went to bed with a headache, and I slipped out to meet Clippings in the Botanical Gardens. We sat down to talk in the shade of a fig tree, with twenty times as many stems as the average tree thinks necessary, and the river was one blaze of silver and the farther shore all hazy blue, and near us there was a great bed of peach-coloured cannas. . . . Clippings looked gallant and young in his khaki, and he caught my hands.

'We can do it, Joan! Darling sweet Joan!' said he, 'I've arranged the whole thing.' And it was high summer, and the time for adventure and life was very short, and I tried to behave with composure, but my heart went patty-smack and the cannas got all blurred and sunny.

'Haven't we got to have a license?' I asked breathlessly.

'No, not in this jolly old state!' said Clippings. 'I've been making all sorts of inquiries; it's as simple as a b c.' Then he blushed and pressed my hands until they hurt. 'And *awfully* wonderful,' he whispered, and his ears flamed, and the flickered sunlight glinted on the tiny gold down on his cheek.

'But, Clippings, we aren't twenty-one . . . either of us.'

'We'll have to look as if we were,' said he firmly. 'Of course our families could put us in gaol, but Grandfather would never do that . . . Joan, isn't life wonderful! I don't think those men over there would notice if I kissed you, do you?'

'I'm sure they would,' said I hastily, although he looked peculiarly kissable just then, and I added mentally, referring to possible imprisonment, that I was not at all sure about Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore.

'You *are* lovely,' said Clippings irrelevantly; 'and the sun is just shining on the darlingest little curl at the back of your neck, Joan. Are you quite sure, oh, *sure* you love me?'

'Yes,' I whispered. 'Yes — but we don't want those men to be . . .'

'*Ah* . . . I'd like to tell the whole world,' said Clippings, taking a deep breath. His eyes shone and danced, and his hands were very warm about mine, and in all the trees the doves were calling — of love and summer!

Said Clippings, 'Come, sweetheart, we'll go *now* . . . And oh, Joan, in an hour we can be *married*.'

So we rode in a funny little tram for a while, and then walked several blocks, until we came to an old Presbyterian Church by some tennis courts: a quite old church. And Clippings went to find the minister, and I stood by the porch trying to cultivate the look that a woman of twenty-one

might be expected to have on her wedding day. Presently he came back to say that the Reverend Standish Straton was at his private residence.

'Clippings, have you got a ring?' I asked.

'You bet, Sweet,' he assured me, taking obvious pride in his foresight.

I started to ask how he had known the size, but he said something about catching the minister before he went out; and hurried into the public telephone box. The glass in the top of the door was broken, and the conversation that followed was plainly audible, not only to me, but to three youths on the adjoining tennis court, who promptly came to the fence to listen.

Said Clippings, having made sure of his man:

'If you please, sir, I want you to marry me.'

'Can't be done, old boy,' murmured one of the tennis players; 'the Reverend Standish is a wife and mother already.'

'My fiancée has just come down on the western mail; I am speaking from the church,' explained Clippings. 'No, no!' he cried desperately, repudiating some suggestion on the Reverend Standish's part (possibly of a christening) . . . 'I only want to be married.'

'A very laudable wish, too,' remarked one of the tennis players. 'Does you credit, lad.'

Clippings shook his fist at him through the broken pane and moistly continued his struggle with the slightly deaf old gentleman. At last he

emerged, with wrathful flare at the flannel-clad figures on the court:

'You meet a lot of *silly* coots,' said Clippings, very flushed and fierce. 'Stupid, block-headed sort of chumps . . .'

The minister came sooner than we had hoped and led us into the dim brown church, with its coloured windows — blue and rose. He asked us for various details as to name and age, and Clippings said that he was twenty-two, I twenty-one; the lie turning him horribly and unprecedentedly pink.

'Ye must have twa witnesses,' said the minister when the first formalities were ended. 'I'll call the tinnis players.' They came, large, and kindly, and amused.

The service proceeded normally until it reached the giving of the ring, when Clippings turned deathly pale, plunged his hand distractedly into his pocket and drew out *six* rings. He explained afterwards that, as he hadn't known the size, he had bought plenty to make sure, and meant to try them on before the service, but that in the excitement he forgot. As it was, I don't know whether he thought that more than one ring would render the service null and void, but a look of hopeless despair came into his face and he dropped all six of the little gold circles, and they rolled and clinked away far under the pews.

The minister gazed at him curiously. Then he

asked, explaining that he did so from mere curiosity, how many women Clippings meant to marry that day. The wretched youth, with palpable misery, told him how it had come about. And then, assisted by the tennis-playing young giants, he crawled blushingly about the church and gathered up the rings, and the marriage service waited while we tried them on, and at last found one that fitted my brown finger.

At the church door the aged cleric gave us his blessing, and said in a tone of mournful doubt that he hoped we should be happy. His melancholy may have been aggravated by the fact that Clippings discovered afterwards that he had given him a ten-shilling note in mistake for a five-pound one, which agitated him — Clippings — very much, and he spent a lot of time writing out an apology (which he was evidently proud of, for he sent me a copy when it was finished).

We tried to go quietly away, but the tennis players clung to us hopefully.

They wanted to know was it an elopement. They also wanted some logical reason, for why we should 'have all the fun.' They coarsely enjoined us to give them 'the dinkum oil,' and to be 'sports.' What time Clippings grew pale with rage and walked very erect, deigning no reply. They then vanished into a shop intent on the purchase of shoes and rice. And Clippings grasped my arm and pulled me into the nearest tram: 'I know it's

going the wrong way,' said Clippings, 'but one doesn't care to have people of that sort about where one's women are.'

We were both rather breathless, and my smartest hat was terribly askew, and we made our way back to my hotel while I tried to realize that we were married. Clippings stopped the lift midway between floors and leant firmly upon the stop button.

'Isn't it wonderful — we're married, Joan?' said he. 'Didn't I manage it well? . . . And do you know what . . . *we've never kissed each other yet!*'

I put up a hand to touch the little gleaming hair-waves on the nape of his neck and we looked into each other's eyes, and I think we were both suddenly frightened, for we got no farther with the first kiss, but began to tremble, and in hiding my face on Clippings's shoulder I scratched my nose on his Rising Sun.

'Joan,' he whispered, 'do you *want* to kiss me?'

I raised my face. And by this time we were too close to look into each other's eyes, but, being very inexperienced, we bumped each other's noses, then our lips brushed and met, it seemed only for a little minute, but it left us trembling more than ever.

'Joan,' whispered Clippings, 'Oh, Joan . . .'

Then from below there rose scraps of vile if muffled conversation.

'There aren't no movin' 'er, sir; she must 'ave fused 'erself . . . it aren't *no* use ringin' that-away, sir; any one but a deaf 'ipopotymus 'ud 'ave 'eard

the bell before this, sir . . . No, she aren't at none of the floors, an' there can't be no one in 'er . . . yes, I sent for the helectricians, sir.'

We fled upward terror-stricken, to the accompaniment of triumphant exclamations (assumably from 'sir').

. . . And then we learnt that Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore was dying — in her great house set above the hills. . . . When Clippings and I found Cousin Martha, in her room, she was staring at a telegram from Toowoomba and all her usual competence had fled; she sat bowed on a chair and pressed her large yellow hands together feverishly, and patches of dull red came and went in her sallow face.

'They — they say she is dying . . . Oh, I should not have come away. She may be dead before we get there . . .' said Cousin Martha, and she pushed her hands into her eyes with a gesture that was shockingly childlike. 'No . . . no trains . . .'

Clippings had gone bright pink with sympathy and his voice was dreadfully deep as he muttered, 'Never mind, Miss Martha; oh, *dear* Joan! . . . She's crying . . .'

I sent Clippings for a car, and began clumsily stuffing our things into their boxes, and then, as he tumbled for the door, I called after him, 'A big car that can climb, Clippings.' Then wondered why I had said it, for any one would get a good car for a night run like that over the mountains.

Clippings paused to say indignantly that of course he would get the best car that could be got. But the selection was apparently poor, for he finally arrived with an aged machine obviously and intermittently propelled by three cylinders, and said happily and confidently that the driver seemed 'a fine chap.'

We climbed the Tole-Bar in the cold dawn-light; and then for the first time I remembered that I was still wearing my wedding ring beneath my gloves, and I carefully slipped it off and kissed it, hidden in my hanky, and put it into the most private pocket of my bag. . . . Clippings had been back in camp for many hours, and I wondered if he had slept, in his new military blankets, or if he had thought of us bumping along through the night. Clippings! so delightfully baby that even seventeen-year-old I felt his elder by years. My beloved: *my husband* . . . The thought brought an unexpected, happy, choking sort of tenderness such as I had never known before, and, looking at Cousin Martha, I felt ashamed of my secret joy. For although I loved my grandmother, I loved such a lot of other things too; but Cousin Martha had never heard the doves call of love and summer — or if she had it had been very long ago . . . But I couldn't help thinking of Clippings and how dear he was, and I wondered how soon we should tell our families of our marriage, and how angry they would be, how many love-destroying brutal things they could think of to

say about it — although at the time I had no idea of the real capacity of families. Still our love for each other seemed such a helpless, small, inoffensive thing that the thought of carrying it about for people to be angry with hurt miserably . . . And quite unexpectedly I felt that I was losing an ally in my grandmother, for, although she was a tyrant, Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore had a roving eye . . . We turned along the crest of the Range, and the great valley from which we had climbed grew wonderful with sunrise. Then, as we entered the drive of camphor laurels, Cousin Martha hid her big plain face in the corner of the tonneau. I saw that the house-blinds were down and put a timid hand on her angular shoulder, but she shook it off.

It seemed that, after we left her, my grandmother set out for a forbidden walk, down the wattle paddocks that clung to the lip of the valley. The housemaid and the cook, knowing her weakness, had tried to stop her, but she had given them each a week's wage in lieu of notice and when they still persisted she twirled her ebony cane at them . . . She was dead when they found her some hours later; tiny and frail, sitting watching the sunset paint the splendid hills. A gallant old lady, and somehow I felt that had she chosen her way to die it might have been much as this, and the fancy also came to me that it had been Death at which she twirled her cane . . . Later with a lawyer we went

through her copious, often caustic, notes as to the disposal of her property, and her little old-lady belongings. She had, I think, remembered every one of her far-scattered and largely indifferent family save only Cousin Martha, who had loved her so . . . To me she left her jewels and a hundred a year, neither of which I was to receive until I was twenty-four, by which time, she added in a postscript, I should probably be as intelligent as I ever should be. She further remarked that she loved me foolishly. Cousin Martha made no comment, but, as on my first morning, I saw tears in her eyes, and I wondered, lying awake, if a great devotion ever paid dividends, save of pain, to those who invested it.

In these days of confusion there came the sudden news of the Armistice, and a new complication into the married life of Clippings and myself. As a soldier he could have supported me (sordid word that civilization has used to tie the dear wings of love); as an underpaid bank clerk he certainly, and despairingly, could not. So I went back to Yallandane, still keeping our love a dear and naughty and most thrilling secret, and leaving my small Clippings, to think out innumerable schemes for the accumulation of vast and sudden wealth, in the Brisbane training camp. Cousin Martha was already gone. Having put our affairs into scrupulous order, and patted Tim who loved her, she left one morning without saying good-bye to me . . . So

officially educated, unofficially married, and a poetess (although less a poetess than I had been), with Tim still in the dog-box, and still incapable of 'deportment,' I went back to the West. I had dearly loved my grandmother, I was sorry for Cousin Martha, and very lonely for Clippings . . . for the way he explained things on his middle fingers, and the silken hair-waves on the back of his neck, and for his stubby terrier. Yet I was singingly happy in the little galloping train. We loved each other so — Clippings and I, not the train — and there was all life waiting . . . and I wished one didn't have to die so soon — in only fifty or sixty years, most likely.

My father came to meet me, dear, big, and curly as of old, except that his curls were whiter now. It was very hot, but he wrapped me up in a rug with such dreadful clumsiness and infinite care that I had to roast in it all the way home. He had, you see, very strong opinions about its being a man's duty to take 'real care' of his women-folk; which led at one time and another to great suffering on their part. He told me the sunny, sheepy news of the West, and at times he took a hand off the rickety old steering-wheel and gave mine a sudden squeeze, and I fed him on chocolates, for which he had a secret love, although he said that he couldn't see what I saw in them, and I told him all my funniest stories. As a rule I had to explain them three or four times before he saw a joke, and when he did

see it, it was hardly ever the joke that I had meant to entertain him; but we were both ridiculously happy . . . The white mirage ran along the red road before us, and the little grey mulgas danced and wavered in the heat.

'You've got a nice colour in your cheeks, Joan,' said my father admiringly. 'I suppose that mountain air must be very healthy.' I loosened the kangaroo fur rug a little and reflected that it was possible the Christian martyrs had looked well on their flame-wrapped stakes; but I said that it was doubtless the clear air of the hills. Then I added that my father himself was blooming. His cheeks bunched ruddily, and he expanded his immense chest.

'You think so, eh?' he asked. 'Well, that proves the stuff's good! . . . Randell's Radium Rheumatic Tabloids, you know, I've just finished my first bottle . . .'

I put my arm about his giant shoulders where I felt the swell of the muscles under the old blue shirt (he had always, so long as ever I could remember, possessed an old blue silk shirt that he wore in the innocence of his heart 'for style').

'Have you been much troubled with rheumatism, Daddy?' I asked him.

He looked slightly defiant, and his forehead grew a shade pinker. 'Well, no,' he said, 'but I felt sure from the testimonials that it was good stuff . . . and you can't beat being on the safe side.' I

agreed with him, and, although I think that my face remained calm, I hid it against his amplitude of shelter. 'Your mother,' he said regretfully, 'is very old-fashioned about that sort of thing; she believes in doing nothing till some damn complaint has a hold on you.'

It was night before we crossed the open stretch of irrigation about the homestead. My mother had not heard us drive up, and we found her giving last touches to my room; and it seemed such a funny little room after Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore's. A little galvanized-iron room, with great untrimmed timber supports; kerosene-case shelves and dressers; curtains of unbleached calico, and turkey-twill cushions. Quite unexpectedly I realized that it might have been rather hard for them to make me the allowance that they had through the last years, and to pay for my clothing as Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore believed that I should be clothed; and I looked away from my dress to my mother's and choked.

Then I felt mean and wanted to tell them about Clippings, but it was so happy to be home again, and, anyway, the Bank would dismiss him, and what could we do . . . ? I blew my nose vigorously, and straightened my grey crêpe de chine dress and attacked my flattened curls. For, after all, the family that wouldn't like Clippings and his terrier had no taste . . .

CHAPTER IV

Of the Flowering Orange Trees

Dickie came in from camp next morning. During the course of the war he had enlisted repeatedly as a would-be stretcher-bearer, being conscientiously opposed to the bearing of arms; but some hidden defect in his blue eyes had rendered him useless as a soldiering machine. It had been a great disappointment to him, for I think that he had wanted to be under fire just to show himself that he was not afraid; at least not too afraid to stop there. Dickie grown to manhood had the rare gift of almost perfect physical beauty. He looked like a young pagan god, wide-shouldered, thin-loined, beautifully balanced, with a shining of sun-faded gold hair curled tight about his head, a straight nose just a shade high, and a mouth that the sunlight made beautiful reflected lights on. Unfortunately he had ideals, which were in no wise pagan. He was 'the beautiful youth, the heart of honour, the tongue of truth,' and until one has encountered him in the flesh one has no idea of how unpleasant he can be. Dickie greeted me with gentle but firm coldness, which hurt me, until I found that 'the repression of emotion' was one of his ideals. He did not smoke; he quietly reproved my father for swearing; he drank only water; refused to have enough bedding in cold

weather, and read 'The Simple Life,' 'The Idylls of the King,' and particularly the 'Passing of Arthur.' If you remonstrated with him for being unbearably rude, he merely looked at you out of shining eyes, and said, in a firm, repressed voice, that because right was right to follow right was 'wisdom in the scorn of Consequence.' After he had said it three times, I privately burnt his 'Œnone,' but it did no good, for he knew it by heart. He was, however, somewhat redeemed by the fact that, although he stood six feet three, he was only nineteen — and Dickie.

We went for a walk through the sunny irrigations, beautiful with the fading of summer. The bulrush heads were spilling their brown velvet, the wild may had turned crimson, and there were only a few blue native cornflowers left in the grey grass tussocks. Painted sandpipers sped along the little drains of clear water . . . My throat felt swollen with the beauty of it all, and I put a hand on Dickie's arm.

'How utterly wonderful this country is, Dick! . . . I don't believe the sun shines like this anywhere else.'

Dickie looked at me out of a 'repressed' eye, and said in a 'measured' voice that the nurse of full-grown souls was solitude. I reflected that I didn't care if it was, and that I had liked Dickie better before his soul grew so much. It's horrid to look at a nice healthy boy and feel that he struggles with

it in private (his soul, I mean), and I felt sure that Dickie did. He made no offer to retain my hand, but kept his clasped behind him, and he walked very slowly. In the past I had had to run to keep up with him. Presently the conviction grew upon me that he was not walking at all. I was revolted by the idea, but I felt sure that he was '*pacing*.' I bore it for a quarter of a mile, but then he asked me if I had read the 'Kreutzer Sonata,' and what I thought of its views on marriage. At the stage when I wrote poems about the grey-whispering pines they had filled me with a certain sorrowful comfort. But that was before I married Clippings; Clippings and the sorrows of the 'Kreutzer Sonata' did not seem to go together somehow.... Also I *knew* that Dickie had been pacing.

I said that the gentleman who treated his wife as the hero of the 'Kreutzer Sonata' had had no business to have any views at all; that what he really wanted was a jolly good spanking.

I then asked if Dickie could possibly stop pacing and walk, or, if he couldn't, could he pace a little faster. He turned pink from his classic forehead to the end of his Grecian chin, but otherwise he remained repressed, and merely suggested that if I preferred it he was quite content to go on alone. He then proceeded with 'deliberate speed, majestic instancy.' I threw a clod at his retreating figure, and it caught him even where my father used to improve him as a small boy. After which I felt rather better, and went back to the house.

That afternoon Dickie returned to camp, taking with him, so far as Mother and I could ascertain, only a loaf of bread and a copy of Horace. And I slipped back into the dear station life — the sunny march of boundary riding, and shooting, and trapping, and mustering . . . My father shot an eagle with his new telescopic-sighted Savage rifle; shot it as it swung superbly, far up in the sunshine against the deep hard blue. A masterly shot it was, and we both caught our breath as the wings, with their ten-foot spread, closed at the impact of the bullet. For a moment the big bird seemed to hang there with folded pinions . . . then the terrific earthward rush began, and I shut my eyes as he struck. . . .

In driving round the south boundary across a tangle of spinney and false wattle, we put up a big red dingo, who had just killed a kangaroo: I fired at him, but I was excited, and he was trotting quickly, so the shots went wide . . . The lambing promised to be unusually good, and one had to drive very carefullly through the resting sheep, lest the little chaps mistook the car for their mother and got themselves run over before they discovered the difference: little stupid, pink-nosed fellows tumbling trustfully into a highly unreliable world . . .

One morning we drove up to the Claypan Well, and in the shade of the wild-fuchsia bushes a cluster of ewes were sleeping. At our approach

they ran in clumsy fright, leaving one little fat ram lamb asleep in a dust-hollow. Suddenly waking and terrified at finding himself alone mid the inanimate, he started to run towards us, and I stopped the car. He stood undecidedly on his absurdly long silky legs . . . And then the horses swept in to water at the little Claypan. Seeing us they snorted, and wheeled, and circled about, displaying their shining hides, and the lamb dashed after them — a wobbling babyish dash that at intervals tripped him up, and shook his fat little tummy about. He made several tremendous springs across small twigs and tussocks, and as the horses halted he ran up to them, and a bright bay mare smartly presented her heels to him and laid back her ears. My father gave a great shout, and we both jumped from the car and began to run towards the scene of butchery. The mare kicked wickedly, and the woolly baby landed on his side in a fallen mulga head.

I thought that it was the end, but he came up gamely, staggeringly untangled his baby legs from the dead branches, and set out again after the horses. We tried to hunt them away, but they would gallop only a few yards and then wheel and snort. The lamb ran up a second time, and a half-grown foal lunged out and broke one of the little chap's forelegs. He followed them with his foot swinging, and it took him longer to catch them then, but he gave a little glad bleat as he did it.

The next kick drove his head in, and when my father picked him up his little pink mouth was open, and blood running from his nostrils. The old man held him in his arms, and shook his fist after the playing horses, then he shook it at the sky and cursed all Heaven. But if it happened to be listening, I defy it to have minded. For it was not for the loss of the lamb that he swore, but because it had run so fast, and given such a little pleased bleat . . .

My mother and I fed the fowls, and looked for ducks' eggs along the reeded drains, and churned the cream in blue-banded basins. And Clippings wrote to me of love and wealth . . . and, as some one has said, it only takes enough of such things to make a life. Winter came.

Mrs. Gluber still presided in the kitchen, but she was helped now by an Australian-German peasant girl: beautiful as is often the German stock planted in new soil; blue-eyed and with endless masses of fair hair that she coiled over her ears in two great plaits. Her mouth was full, her cheeks gleaming red, her throat golden. She held her attire together with safety pins and wore old carpet slippers; was very much afraid of Mrs. Gluber and of God, and sobbed when they were angry with her, and sang wild guttural, infinitely sad German folk-songs. Dickie said that all she needed was kindness and education, but she ate blood pudding with steady German chewings, and, except when she laughed

or sang, not even the shadow of animation or of thought troubled her blue gaze. Then once I found that she had caught a mouse by impaling it on a hatpin (not because she was intentionally cruel, but because she, in common with Mrs. Gluber, knew that animals had no souls and were therefore insensitive to hatpins). Her name was Freda, and she used to giggle endlessly at my frilly silk underthings and pretty dresses. When I asked her why she laughed, she backed away from me with her red mouth parted, and then she threw back her frowsy, beautiful head and laughed and pointed at my plain brown face. I did not like Freda. But Dickie always raised his hat particularly high to her, and got very angry because he said that German men ill-treated their women so, and supposed that Freda would marry some brute of a farmer who would work her to death; at the thought of which Dickie's cheeks grew hot with young wrath.

Spring came. Clippings and I, saving with mutual energy, had collected nearly twenty pounds, and Clippings, at least, felt that we were on the high road to marital independence. (He had given up smoking because it was so expensive.)

Then my father received a telegram from Jerry to say that he was demobilized and coming home. I heard the news calmly, my soul being with Clippings and his terrier, but I meant if possible to show Jerry what he had lost by his faithlessness. To show him that he had lost something appreciа-

ble, I mean. So when the time came I locked myself up in my room and went carefully through my dresses, until at last I stood before the mirror holding the two that Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore had said suited me best. One was of flouncy, poppy-coloured taffeta. 'Joan really looks quite flower-like in that . . . *do* keep your heels within hailing distance of each other, child,' the old lady had observed. 'If you want other people to think you a wind-blown poppy, you can't stand like the Colossus of Rhodes . . . Was it Rhodes, Martha?' It was certainly a delectable dress, but I doubted my capacity to simulate a wind-swayed blossom . . . The other was sleeveless, of soft cream net with an irregular flounce. 'That dress has natural grace; it would be very hard to look clumsy in it . . . it is a beautifully *safe* dress; only don't commonize it by wearing pink roses on the shoulder,' said my grandmother, presiding at its fitting. 'I wore a pink rose with a cream lace dress once . . . in Simla. But I had sentiment as an excuse . . . now a cream rose or a camellia . . .' And as always I had listened dutifully, for Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore had been called the loveliest woman in India before she settled down to have her eleven small boys, and she knew what she was talking about.

I put away the poppy dress, and laid out the cream net one with my silk stockings and cream satin shoes. Then I went out through the great still-heat of late afternoon; for although our garden

held neither camellias nor roses, over beyond the pepper trees the oleanders were in blossom. Flower-massed deepest rose and velvet-red and faint frail shell-pink in colour, making the garden drunk with their scent; the perfumed death-traps of a million flies and bees. They were my father's favourite flowers, and I think that almost every kind in the world bloomed in our gravel-floored garden among the great pepper trees. I chose, from a delicately growing bush with blossoms something like tiny, rich-cream camellias. Then through the unmoving, heat-drowsed hum of sleeping summer, I carried them back to the coolness of my room.

Jerry arrived while I was dressing; but I was not going to hurry about meeting Jerry, so I went on dressing very slowly. Cream becomes brown women, and eighteen gives something of beauty even to the plain, which I couldn't help noticing; so I gave my brown curls a final fluff, and then rubbed a little eau-de-cologne behind my ears, through the hair at the nape of my neck, and across my upper lip; for, as my grandmother had once remarked, although no lady ever anticipated being kissed a little preparedness was excusable. Then, with a shrug which I felt to be quite woman-of-the-worldly, I went in to dinner.

Jerry was standing at the sideboard talking to my father.

'Guess who this is, Jerry,' said the dear old man, who thought me a model of womanly beauty.

'Joan? . . .' asked Jerry, without turning. 'Don't say Joan has grown pretty . . . I'm almost afraid to look round.'

Then he set down his glass and came to me.

'Not pretty,' he said, '*adorable* . . . and marvellously tall, almost up to my shoulder.' He held my hands and looked down at me, and his hands tightened until they hurt, and I felt my whole face go crimson.

As such things usually take place at a dinner table, I suppose that we both ate and talked. But beyond hearing Dickie ask Jerry's real opinion of the influence of military training upon human character, I remember neither. I was absurdly happy simply because Jerry was there, and I meant Jerry to tell me that *he* was glad . . . After dinner I walked out into the garden. It was still very hot and the moonlight flicker-fleckered through the pepper boughs. I passed the oleander bushes still faintly showing their colours in the moonlight, on amongst the flowering orange trees; dark greenery all coralled with white stars, wonderfully scenting all the hot, dry-blue night air, for, although the oleanders smelt strongest under the sun, the night belonged to the orange flowers. Each tree stood in a little square bed edged by logging to stop the mulch from being washed away when they were watered, and I perched myself on a grey box log, and waited for Jerry. Presently I heard him call me, and then he came swiftly

through the little round orange trees, sat himself beside me, and caught my hands again.

'Little Comrade,' he said, 'do you still care for me?' And it was so wholly sweet to have him there that I could not answer and he kissed me. He said: 'I've thought so much about coming back to you, Joan, I can't believe I'm really here . . . Oh, Little Comrade, I've missed you so every tiny minute!' (And there was something about Jerry that, although you *didn't*, you couldn't help believing him.)

'Jerry,' I whispered, 'I'm married.'

He let me go and sat very still for a few minutes. Then he said, 'But, I think you love me.'

'Yes,' I answered. What was the use of saying anything else? For it was not only Jerry who had kissed *me*.

He cried: 'Look here, Joan, we can't spoil our lives because of a mistake; you must divorce him . . . What sort of fellow is he that's run you in for a secret marriage, anyway?' he asked angrily, and I knew the black-hearted seducer he had in mind, and I gave a little foolish laugh.

'. . . He has a terrier with dreadfully stumpy legs, and once, when he didn't know that I was looking, he swung a cotton reel for it . . . And he has a grandfather that comes fra the Hielan's, and he loves me very much.' It was not a particularly lucid explanation, but it seemed to bring light to Jerry.

'Oh,' he said.

'He's the nicest thing that ever lived, Jerry,' I added.

The orange trees were ebony and ivory and silver and dark green, and smelt dreadfully sweet. We sat in silence for a long time.

'Oh, why *did* you do it, Joan?' asked Jerry at last. Whereat rage gathered in me.

'Because you wrote me such sensible, abominable letters,' I said.

'I couldn't write love letters to a little schoolgirl,' said Jerry.

'Other people could,' I observed, trying to metamorphize Clippings into a host of fervent suitors, and blushing a little, although I hoped that it would deceive Jerry.

'I didn't think of that,' admitted he, and his hand, which I had always loved so, came feeling for mine.

I got to my feet and said: 'You might have thought of it if I had been pretty . . . And I won't divorce Clippings! I don't *want* to!'

'I know it's going to be hard if the terrier has such stumpy legs,' he said, 'but how can you marry me unless you do . . .?' We stood facing each other in the scented moonlight, and my anger died and I held out my hand to him. (You see there was something about Jerry that, although you were angry with him, you couldn't be.)

I said: 'I can't, Jerry dear . . . He didn't know

the size of the wedding ring and he bought *six* and dropped them all over the church floor.' And I stood on tiptoe and kissed him; and turned and ran through the orange trees . . .

I couldn't go back to my room just then, so I went down through the orchard and out of the garden towards the old culvert by the stock-yards, where I sat me down . . . The water was still hot from the bore, and it steamed in the warm moonlight, and the floating islands of artesian slime were opalescent. I dabbled my fingers in the hot, hurrying stream and felt frightfully miserable, and yet wickedly elated somehow . . . because Jerry wanted me a little.

It was late when I went back through the grey garden gates and the flowering orange trees, and I almost walked into the two who stood there. I saw the moonlight on pale braided hair and the rose velvet of a cheek, and Freda crying in Dickie's arms; his young head bent to her, whispering comfort. As I looked, she broke away still weeping (a strange, unexpectedly elfin sound that somehow went with the night and the great scent of flowers); in rapid, protesting German she said: 'It was but a little plate I broke and she was very angry . . .'

I was very shocked, and I wondered whether it was my duty as a sister to cough at Dickie. But a cough, however dutiful, seemed a futile small thing to hurl against all that splendour of silver night and Freda's tears . . .

Then Mrs. Gluber (still very angry) called her from the kitchen. Dickie watched her go with angry, pitiful eyes . . . I was beginning to feel all miserable now, and I decided to make Dickie hate me in the morning.

CHAPTER V

Of Two Who Loved Each Other

When morning came, I felt better and I tried to remonstrate with Dickie. And I felt just a little bit important about being able to. You see I made it quite clear that I spoke wholly for Dickie's good, and not, as he might ignorantly have assumed, because I liked speaking. I said that I hoped that he would not be annoyed, and did not hint at the fact that I knew he would... Altogether I remonstrated very nicely indeed, a good sensible normal remonstrance, and I felt quite justified in expecting normal reactions from Dickie. For an increased determination to do what he was already doing for so long as he wanted to do it, for any manifestation of acute dislike and complete obstinacy, I was prepared. But Dickie looked beautiful and repressed, and in a deep voice he said:

'Who writes to you as "Little Sweet Joan Wife——"?'

'Dickie, you abominable beast, you've been reading my letters!' I cried. 'How dare you...'

Dickie said, not unreasonably, that if I felt so strongly about my correspondence I should not leave it on the woodheap, which, although poetic at evening, was distinctly wanting in privacy dur-

ing the day. He added that, until he had read the sentence just quoted, he had no ground save my notorious untidiness for assuming that it was mine.

'In any case, you have no right to interfere,' I remarked bitterly. 'When I want your advice I'll ask for it . . . And when I want to tell you who writes to me as . . . as anything at all, I will . . . and not before.' I knew that, in view of my nice sisterly remonstrances of some moments back, this was mere low bluster, but again I was not prepared for the effect upon Dickie. I think that he must have been far more angry all the time than his repression indicated.

At any rate, he went white to his beautiful lips, and he said in a smothered, trembling voice: 'That will most likely be before I ask you to direct my conduct . . . and your position here is a lie whoever that letter came from, and — and what right have you to despise another woman just because she's a servant? . . . Of all contemptible meannesses that's the worst.'

I said, 'I don't.'

His voice broke with its trembling, and his brown hands clenched, and I had not believed that Dickie could look so angry.

'You do, you do . . . you remember it all the time . . . If she wasn't, you wouldn't mind my being sorry for her.' Then he added with passion of pity: 'All that beauty just to be trodden out with

work, for some one else . . . for some brute that will marry her. What chance has her soul ever had?'

I still felt responsible for Dickie, and his face suddenly frightened me: for he was only nineteen, and, alas, for such natures there is no Holy Grail to hunt for any more . . . And then we quarrelled, and my Dickie left me with scornful eyes and went back to camp among the Southern Spinneys; forgetting to take with him even 'The Passing of Arthur.'

And Mrs. Gluber went on scolding Freda in the kitchen. As for me my elation was gone, and I wondered how unhappy one could be and live, and half expected to develop a consumptive lung. But there is no escape from the tyranny of a stumpy-legged terrier and six wedding rings.

So I told Jerry that he must go away, and Jerry told us that a distant relative had left him enough money to begin as a pastoralist, and that he meant to buy a cattle property in the far North . . .

'I'll come and see you some day just to hear the down larks, Jerry,' said my father. 'When we were going out in eighty-three, we had a chap called Hally with us, a writer on the "Bulletin," before he took to the bottle, and he used to call them the "Downs of the Singing Gold" . . . and it did sort of describe them,' he added, blushing at the sentimental lapse, 'at sunset and sunrise . . .'

Jerry said that he remembered my father telling us of it, and that he meant to find the Singing Gold.

On the day that Jerry was to leave, I walked with him down the old road by the irrigations waiting for the coach to overtake us . . . and the world was very miserable, and heavy, dark clouds sagged across the sky, and little winds moved the tall grass . . . By an old log Jerry halted.

'Let's sit down a minute, Joan,' he said.

I sat and looked at him hard, trying to remember him for always; and Jerry was ugly until you liked him, and even then he was not handsome. Indeed, it showed how I had once felt about Jerry that I could mentally transform him into a Greek god or a young Viking . . .

We talked for a long while sitting on the old log, and the first big raindrops splashed our faces and dismally pitted the dusty road and then turned it to red mud. When we heard the far barking of the station dogs which told us that the coach was starting, we stood beside an old mulga and clung together, wrapped in Jerry's cloak, and I hoped I should die before he went away . . . and the rain ran off his face and dripped onto mine. He said: 'Oh, my little foolish love . . . Say that some day I can come back. Promise me that!' — and he held my face in his hands and looked into my eyes. 'If you are ever free, Little Comrade . . .'

But I couldn't hope for that, because Clippings was too dear, but, oh, it was sweet that he wanted me to.

Then he left me to cry against a mulga tree, and

he walked on down the coach road — and later I went back to the house. . . . My Tim was a dog who knew his own mind, but as Jerry went away in the rain he displayed the one great indecision of his life. He sat beside me trembling, with the whines rising in his great hairy throat, and then he ran after Jerry, looking ashamed. But at the end of a hundred yards he turned, and you could tell from the very set of his ears that he thought, 'What the devil will happen to her if I'm not about?' — and he jumped and kissed Jerry's face very swiftly and came back again.

The spring-summer flowed into high-summer, and all faded into the richness of autumn. The still days were ethereally hazed, and the brown bulrush fluff drifted slowly from the golden reed banks, the grape leaves on the old trellises glowed bronze and crimson, while the deciduous cedars were clear yellow against the deep blue autumn sky, and the orange garden was all bowed with ripe fruit. I liked to sit in the evening on a corner of one of the little square beds, and watch the last sunlight turn the bright oranges rosy, and then leave them fading into dusky gold among their dark leaves . . . and the sky above all golden green, with the faint white stars coming into it . . . And I wondered what Jerry was doing, and Clippings . . . the two so different and so dear. One night I walked among the little trees and thought that to-morrow I must begin picking their loads, and a light from a distant

verandah lit some of the fruit masses, and the gold balls and deep leaves were very lovely against the night sky with its stars just sharpening for winter.

Then I met Dickie, and he said: 'Joany, I want to talk to you.' We had hardly spoken since our quarrel in the spring, but we walked down to the old culvert and sat together on the great hollow log.

He told me of Freda, and the little baby that was going to be theirs, and that he was going to marry her. And he looked very white and young. . . . And you could not think of evil in connection with my Dickie, who had so wanted to help the world, or, for that matter, with little German Freda who had four poached eggs for breakfast . . . So I cuddled Dickie's shoulders, as I had when we were little, and we sat there together in the dark listening to the running water. Presently he said in an odd, shaken voice:

'Oh, Joany, a little baby . . . It's a thing that ought to be so different to this . . .' Then he added passionately, 'It's wicked to create a whole life without thought . . . I — I could have faced everything else, Joan.'

I didn't know whether by everything he meant a possible postponement of saving the world, or shame, or Freda's 'H's.' But to me — then — the worst part seemed that, just because there was to be a little Dick, my Dickie, who chased the rainbows; and little Freda (who would like to have eaten five eggs if Mrs. Gluber had let her) would

have to walk together always, which made it very serious. And we sat very close together and listened to the hot water running and running in the night under the terrificness of the sky.

You see, even when Dickie was a little, solid, gold-fluff-eyebrowed boy he had cherished a devouring passion for babies; individually and collectively, and in any degree of slobbersomeness. If one of our neighbours was granted offspring, Dickie would spend the rapturous hours of a visit in toe-tickling and jigging, or in escorting it for little gurgling walks in its pram. He left for home regretfully, and rendered the journey tedious by a narration of the baby's prowess in various infantile accomplishments such as saying 'goo'; and much of his pocket money went in the purchase of rattles and orris-root cows (he took to orris-root as safely innocuous after nearly poisoning an object of his adoration with licorice and chewing-gum).

As for me, although I was spasmodically attached to my own chimerical and distant family, I took little interest in fleshly infants; it being my private opinion that their attractions did not justify the fuss that was made about them. I had, for instance, early discovered that, if you gave a baby a finger to hold, it held it. This was perhaps interesting, but it wanted greatly in the dear element of surprise. Not so for Dickie. He would extend a worshipping finger, and, when the usual developments ensued, exclaimed with unvarying

delight of astonishment: 'Look, he's got it!... look, Joan, *tight!*' I was determined not to be found wanting in sentiment proper to the occasion, but I could never see its reason. Babies had a natural tendency to hold fingers; for me that ended it. But to Dickie such things were everlasting wonder. I suppose all women find babies less astonishing than men do, because they have bathed and nappied so many for such endless years; but anyway, even for a nice man, Dickie was always unusually excited about them, and therein, I think, at first, he found by far the sharpest tragedy of the mess into which he had gotten — for, you see, he believed that babies should be had so very carefully.

Then came his telling my father of Freda, and the old man, failing to shake the boy's determination to marry her, turned on him with bitter anger; anger that at last begat anger in return. Dear old man and dear young one, they stood together in the peaceful lamplit room and rent to pieces all the beauty of their lives together. They had worked side by side from the time when Dickie, in blue rompers, used to toil after my father along the new fence lines, staggering under the weight of his toy axe. Dear two who loved each other...

The one had boasted always of 'my father,' the other of 'my son'; the dear boasting of love that no one wants to listen to because they want to have their own little love boast. Neither had ever

looked at the other without the sudden love-light coming into their eyes. They had been so proud of each other; so happy with each other . . . My father, in talking of the inferiority of modern stockmen, had always exempted Dickie; Dickie was, we gathered, clever even as the stockmen of the droving days: as Anton, the great swimmer, who was with my father when they were caught in the floods of ninety and ninety-one among the Diamantina Lakes, there where the river spread all across the land after passing through the rocky Gates that bear its name: Anton, who had swum the swift channels with a wire by which to guide the floating wagonettes across . . .

'We used to take off the wheels,' my father would say, great chest swelling with the memory of past venturing — 'take them off and lay them on the wagonette floor; then we wrapped tarpaulins round the lot and set sail, by God! Great clumsy things, but they floated.' His ruddy cheeks bunched into laughter. 'Bits of Noah's Arks, too . . . I remember once we had the cook, and the cook's pet galah, and five dogs, and a thoroughbred foal on board. Across the slow channels we worked them by great paddles, stirrup straps for rollicks; slow as the devil, but still we moved . . . ! The other drovers used to try and catch us up when there were bad rivers to cross, so we could help them over. "Let's catch Marcus Whatmore's plant."' His eyes shone and his beard curled. And although

he would have snorted at the word, the Romance of the West, of the past, touched his great simple form with its light.

In his love of his work, of his home, of his pipe, in his great roaring laughter at the childish jokes that caught his fancy, there was a strong simplicity of the primitive. He had kept step, as it were, with the never-ending succession of clear nights and white noons, with the flaming march of the seasons. He had known the seeming sameness of the pale dawns above the little grey trees and the red earth, preluding the furnace days of summer, or the sharpness of dry winter sunshine. He had known men who toiled slowly under the blasting sun, with steady intensity of labour carving out the wherewithal of life from the sun-bitten grey of the world: slow toiling of men on new fence lines, creeping across arid virgin lands; infinite sweating on the red face of new roads; patient working and following of slow stock, by men who gained at last something of their animal's deliberation of thought and movement; slow suffering of hell-doomed working bullocks dragging plough and scoop through the powder-white clay of new tank sites; dragging them with brute patience of pain on days when the iron draw-chains burnt as if drawn from fire, and the white mirage flickered across the burr-brown flats. A life marred by much of human cruelty and meanness, vice, and slander born of monotony; and yet an impressively epic contest

between patience and strength of man and the immense, indifferent cruelty of Nature in her less domestic moods. A primitive drama of existence played out in the power of the sun. Man living always in close contact with the old Earth, and catching, despite himself, something of her dignity, something also of her blind indifference to the nice delicacies of civilization. No mind brought into unity with the lonely places of the world but is subtly altered by them. The highly sensitive perhaps a little blunted to the importance of ordinary human standards, having stood in the sun, as it were, and watched the ant procession in the dust. (Even as my father had lost utterly, thinking it of no matter, the quality of fine lace that was my Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore's.) The low-minded and brutal unconsciously and quite impersonally ennobled, touched for all bestiality, by the splendour of light, by their kinship with the earth. A life where all men, fine and common, high-souled and dull, lay so often under the still, planet-starred, blue night-arch of the sky, while firelight gilt-with-rose the grey tree-trunks, and made bright lace of fine-twigged dead branches. They had watched it, all perforce, with eyes seeing or unseeing, as they lay on the red dust still warm from the vital heat of day, and it had at last left a certain impression upon them. They had ridden over the agate-strewn floors of dry river beds, bordered by blue-leaved gums; seen the purple flush of the

poisonous pea flowers across the plains or the ragged yarron swamps; come upon great lily-flats spider-starred with white; felt life strain beneath the red hand of drought. They had seen lopsided midnight moons rise as they rode about stirring cattle in the night watch . . . lived always in a setting of immensity and labour. Memory of these things, these men, clung always about the old man as he talked, making a mighty background for the tales, and I liked to think of him, golden beard shining in the rain, as he steered their clumsy dray-boats . . .

'Once we'd just about got the whole plant across when we heard that Drover Meredith was coming. We did our damnedest to get away and leave Drover Meredith, but he caught us as the last load left, and we had to help him . . . lost us four days. By God, we were pretty nearly amphibious then; used to swim the horses and take it in turns to swim beside them! . . . Camped on bits of islands and swam again next day!

'But I was telling you about Anton. On the fast channels we had to use the wire, or our homemade boats were swept away. Well, one morning we came down to the main channel and found it running strong. Anton said that he could get a line over. I didn't think he could; it was damned miserable-looking, too, raining like the devil, and the river yellow and soapy with foam and drifted with black rubbish . . . He was to fasten the rope

round his waist and try for the farther side, and when he was halfway across I was to take the line over my shoulder and follow him.

'Well, it damned nearly drowned both of us. He couldn't get free of the line and the current kept sweeping him down; that meant most of the weight came on me, and I was just about settled when he made shore somehow — a long way down, but still he made it. He fastened the wire to a tree and then collapsed; a beautiful figure of a man he was, Anton; pretty to watch him; but he was done that day! Drifts of rubbish kept coming down, and the water was damned cold, and I was beginning to swallow muddy water and gum leaves and trying to get my last thoughts into shape when Anton saw me. He shouted something that I couldn't hear for the water in my ears, and started back . . . By God! . . . Anyway, he came back . . .' Forty years ago, but big hands and big voice trembled still with tribute to courage.

'Next thing I remember we were both being dislocated by the cook and the horsetailer thinking they were practising first aid. We sat up at last — pretty groggy. Anton said, "Well, we got it across, Boss"; and as he said it damned if a great tree didn't come wallowing and rolling along, and snapped our wire like a cobweb. Anton cried, and I felt like it, damned if I didn't! After that we used to swim one from each side of the river each with a wire and tie them in the middle . . . A great

swimmer, Anton, but no better than Dickie, though. I never saw a boy like *him* in the water . . .' so always.

Tales of great horsemen, but no better than Dickie; of the tracking of stolen cattle across tens of miles by men to whom the dust was an open page; but no better tracking eye than Dickie's; did we remember how he followed the missing cow when he was only six? Yet when the So-Loved stood before him, young face white with travail of youth, the old man who loved him struck at him with bitterness of scorn. What, he asked, would he do with his mistress? Dickie repeated, what to him seemed so obvious, that there was only one thing to do, marry her, for, you see, there was going to be a little baby. Anyway, he must if she wished it. Poor boy, poor Dickie-of-the-High-Ideals, who had gently reproved even my father's 'damning,' he was always so terribly serious, in many things so terribly innocent.

He took his flaying in silence for so long that it seemed to me that any, understanding but a little, must cry with pity for him.

'You love her, I suppose?' asked the old man with hot scorn.

Then a curious thing happened. I saw Dickie, surprised, start to say 'no,' as clearly as though he had spoken it, and then in him was born the queer loyalty-of-word that almost all men accord their wives, many the women who are not their wives.

'Yes,' said Dickie. It was a dear lie, and I loved him for it, but to my father it must have seemed defiance.

'Liar!' he cried. 'You liar!'

Then Dickie answered him. It was sad to see those two, so-loving, irredeemably destroying love — because they loved. Of all dear love-gifts of the past they made favours. Of all service sacrifice. Of all Dickie's absurd, dear Dickienesses my father made faults which he said had not passed unnoticed. He, crying to be assured of Dickie's love for him, yet said that he had always doubted it.

My mother entered with flushed, frightened face, and suddenly Dickie turned to her and caught her to him and kissed her. Then, in passing, he pressed my hands, and, without word of farewell to my father, was gone.

'He will soon come crawling back,' said the old man violently, but from his face we knew that he did not believe it. Then he sat down and leant his head on his hands.

'When he comes back he'll get nothing from me,' said my father, wanting us to speak of Dickie's return, but what was there to say?

CHAPTER VI

. . . And a Little Billy of Eggs

I WORKED in the vegetable garden in the clear, pale-grey wideness of an evening, tinted with thin amber to the west, silvered by the rising moon to the east. The cabbages showed faintly blue, just brushed with moonlight; there were darker patches of rape; on the pale pea-beds a thin spattering of white flowers; a grey duskiness of paths, and from my hose a pale silver-flecked spray. Over all blew the wistful faint scent of the first orange blossoms, etherealizing and making magic all the night . . . If anything can inspire peace it is surely a moonlit cabbage; but for me there was nothing save agitation in the death of day. Clippings had bought — *an island.* To the gently bred there is something almost immoral in the idea! An island is the sort of thing that one associates only with goatskins and pirate gold, steam yachts and cannibals. And yet upon analysis I found it much easier to connect Clippings with the ownership of an island than of a suburban dwelling. He somehow suggested the heroic 'Frank' or 'Jack' or 'Tom' of a 'Boys' Own Annual' romances; and indeed, of this periodical I later ascertained that he was a diligent student, joyously criticizing the hero's technique in his various light, single-handed brushes with a thou-

sand man-eating savages or a brace or so of crocodiles . . .

'It would have been wiser,' Clippings would say, 'to have polished off the Head Man first, he was the real trouble-maker, and then have gone after the Old Chief . . .' or, 'It must have stirred that old crocodile up when he swallowed the plug of dynamite . . . I wonder what *would* happen if you baited a bit of meat with dynamite and gave it to a crocodile . . . ?'

On the evening of cabbages and orange flowers I did not know of Clippings's literary tastes, but even so I heard of his purchase with more trepidation than surprise. It appeared that a friend of Clippings had owned the island, having in his turn bought it from a sea captain of romantic tendencies and lean financial resource. Clippings's friend had never seen his island and, matrimony finally forcing him to relinquish it, he had built upon the slender thread of the sea captain's narrative a most entrancing structure of goats, palms, pigs, paw-paws, precipices, and plantains; the which completely ensnared the ardent heart of Clippings. He wrote me a really inspiring treatise upon the beauty of island life in general, and ended by the announcement that he had obtained the island in question at a startling discount; and proposed that we occupy it forthwith. As he had paid the sum of thirty-five pounds for our prospective residence, I trusted that he had indeed obtained it cheaply, for

an island, overvalued at such a price, seemed to me a dubious habitation. At any rate, the time had obviously come to make my family aware of Clippings's existence, for Clippings equally obviously meant to seek out his island, and all that was maternal in me revolted at the thought of letting him go alone.

A husband, although not an unusual possession, is a singularly difficult one to 'break' tactfully to one's parents. No matter with what discretion you approach the matter, its final revelation is likely to be a shock. I wished vainly that Clippings had been of that stern breed who can successfully defy an angry father whilst their bride reclines trustfully on their broad bosoms. But when I thought of my father's immensity of person and curling beard, I would have as soon handed over the proverbial lamb to the lion *before* the last day as have delivered Clippings to his anger, and also I felt sure that, if they should by any chance 'lie down together,' Clippings would undoubtedly, if metaphorically, 'be inside.'

Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore had once observed, 'There is only One Person with whom you can dispense with tact; that is "Our Father which Art in Heaven," and remember, Joan, He *is* in heaven' — she had smoothed her lavender-scented black mittens. 'Never, Joan, do me the injustice of being *perfectly frank* with me; my prayer has always been, "Dear God, let those whom I love deceive me with successful *tact*, or if

they must undeceive me let them double the quantity."' I had, as I have said, great faith in my grandmother, and I was only too anxious to apply tact to the present situation, but didn't quite see how it was to be done.

Another tenet of hers returned to me, however. 'If you are going to do something that will annoy people, tell them about it afterwards; then they will only be annoyed *that you have done it*, and won't have all the exasperation of trying to stop you.' Clippings was of course 'done,' as it were, and could therefore, according to the old lady, be safely told about, but the island was still in the future tense, and I felt that an island, being more unconventional than a husband, might prove in corresponding ratio more annoying. If, when asked what property Clippings had, I could only have said, 'A farm,' or 'a house,' or even 'a milk run,' I might have faced it, but I could not say 'an island.' It held potentiality of ridicule too blighting to be supported by mere flesh.

The water sush-sushed on the cabbage leaves and the stars came out. It was coward's part, but I felt that I must be entrenched in the fastnesses of the island — if a bargain island had any — before I revealed its existence to the world. Later, when people had become accustomed to the idea, and if, unlike Stephen Leacock's mariner, my constitution had not been undermined by a diet of sand and gravel, I might emerge again.

I was busily trying to devise ways of departure when a small half-caste boy brought me a letter. I left him looking like Krishna, after the way of small half-caste boys, and preparing to eat the green peas, and carried my letter to the dining-room . . . And so swiftly runs tragedy on the heels of the lovely and absurd, that it was a note from Dickie who had married his little peasant Freda and taken her to a selection fifty miles away, and in it he told me that she had come back from hospital with their baby and it seemed ill and he wanted me. '. . . Please, Joany, he's such a dear little fellow . . .'

'Who is your letter from, Joan?' asked my father, and, when I told him, I saw the hope leap up in his eyes. 'I suppose he wants to bring the baby here?' he said. Poor dear, after what had passed between them, and knowing Dickie, I wondered why he hoped it. But he turned his face away when I told him that Dickie made no mention of return. Presently he muttered that perhaps it was 'a bit of a feeler.' I thought him looking very old, and as I cuddled his shoulder I hoped that he wouldn't mind the island too much, and that if it proved habitable he might come and sojourn upon it with me.

'He's got no damned right to ask you, but — but I suppose you'd better be going, Joan,' said my father. 'I'll get the car ready, but you'll have to drive yourself. I don't suppose he'd want

to see me,' he said, 'not,' he added quickly, 'that I want to see him.' As I was starting he thrust a tin billy of eggs into my hands.

'You can't punish a kid,' he said half angrily. 'It might like some of these.' I took the billy from him with quivering lips and a horrid tendency to choke, for the baby was not yet two weeks old. But I did hope that the eggs would do some mental good to Dickie.

It was past midnight when I drew up before the little two-roomed iron cottage, and the car lights showed the trampled red dust about the door, a frightened rooster cackling on a barrel, and a confusion of things heaped on the earth verandah. Desolate and bare and ugly as are most selectors' houses . . . and seeming somehow a pathetically small speck under the starry spring sky. Dickie did not come out to meet me, so I switched off the car lights and walked to the door. Behind me was the great, sleeping darkness of the earth; a dead mulga forming a faint lacy shadow on the deep luminousness of space; a few stars mirrored in the little cattle-trampled bore drain, and great sad calling of curlews.

Opening the door, I saw Dickie kneeling beside a tiny bundle which lay on a chair seat; with one arm he supported it, and in his free hand he held a teaspoon. On his face was a terrible earnestness of concentration, and he had not heard me come. The little room was very untidy; baby clothes

hung drying by the fire; feeding-bottles lay on the rough board table; in the corners dresses were heaped, and by the shadeless lamp stood a pannikin of milk from which Dickie was dipping with his teaspoon. Forehead puckered, as he had puckered it when he was a little boy, he kept trying to make the child drink.

'Baby,' he said once with infinite exquisiteness of love reproof. 'Oh, *Baby* . . .' He jumped up as I spoke to him.

'Joan! I didn't think you'd come to-night . . . I can't get him to drink.' His eyes were very brilliant, with the brilliance of illness, and he pressed them against the crook of his arm. Then, speaking with almost angry emphasis, he said, 'There's a knack of feeding babies, of course.' He held the absurdly little bundle out to me, and, taking it, I looked down on to a tiny pinched face, creased with seeming trouble, quite white, quite dead! In the shock of the moment I nearly dropped it; then I carried it across to the little pickle-box cradle, and as I put it down one wee waxen hand fell free of its shawl with a queer suggestion of appeal and weariness. It seemed too little to have known either life or death . . . such a little, little scrap in the grip of the immensities. When I turned to the room again, Dickie was beside me.

He pushed me aside and bent over the baby, looking at it for a long minute with the same desperate concentration with which he had tried to

make it drink, then, still questioning, he very slowly placed one finger on the little open hand, and I turned away.

'Yes,' he said, 'Yes . . . silly I didn't notice it before.' Then he pushed his hands across his eyes again, and added, with a sort of apology, 'You see, I haven't had much sleep lately.' He walked onto the verandah, walked very clumsily for Dickie, and I followed him and put my hand on his shoulder. My Dickie who had recited of the 'daffy-*dills*'! We stood looking out at the great warmly sleeping darkness of the earth, covered by the spring sky luminous with such millions of stars . . . blotted here and there with the irregular softness of spring clouds.

'If you are thinking of comforting me, by telling me that it's better for him to be dead, please don't,' said Dickie harshly. 'I've got brains enough to know it myself, but that doesn't alter the fact that he felt nice and I'd come to want him . . . you see, he wasn't old enough to show you how useless caring was.'

I brought him the little absurd gift of eggs in their old billy, and he took them from me and then poured them at his feet and trod on them . . . There was a pathetic, foolish crunch-crunching of eggshells. Then he walked out and away through the darkness. I went back and straightened the little hot room, and then, taking the lamp, I opened the bedroom door and looked at Freda. She was

sleeping on a wide disordered bed, one arm thrown high; her masses of pale hair rumpled about her, and from one startlingly white shoulder her coarse nightdress slipped. Illness, and perhaps lack of eggs, had made her thinner, and I had never seen her look as beautiful — poor little peasant soul! On the table beside her stood a bottle of cheap scent and a collection of cosmetics. Poor Freda, asleep amongst her cheap treasures, while in the other room lay the very small baby, and a man with ridiculously egg-splashed boots went suffering. I did not wake her, and presently Dickie came back and stood beside me.

'Will she care much?' I asked him.

His face looked hard, evil almost. 'Not much,' he said, '... noisily.' Then he leant his head against the door as one ashamed and whispered, voice thick with tears: 'See those things — the scent and stuff... I asked her why she used it, and she said — for me, Joan.'

Looking at the little bottles of cheap scent, I wondered just how much happier Freda would have been with her German farmer.

PART THREE

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

Of a Compact Small Cottage

Before the cabbages in the garden had been superseded by marrows and melons — being a coward — I ran away, leaving full confession of both Clippings and the island, and telling my mother and father that, although I had done, and contemplated doing, such darksome things, Clippings was really very nice, and I felt sure the island would be. I also explained that it was not one of the wild South Sea Islands, but only just off the Queensland coast, and that I hoped they would come and see me on it very soon.

They took the news, well — familysomely. They said that when I was — as I certainly would be — destitute, I might return to them; and implied that, as the keep of a few dozen extra would not make any material difference, I might also bring Clippings and the children — which they did mention would be a nuisance and I shouldn't have had . . . There is, you see, a sort of technique in dealing with these situations. Your family makes you an offer such as the above, which you — having had, it must be admitted, but limited experience of dying — decide to perish rather than accept. They then wait hopefully for you to be

smitten by affliction — which, by the way, doesn't mean that they don't love you; for they do — and you begin to write them nice bright letters which annoy them more than anything else could, although you, being young and inexperienced, do not realize this, until later you become, as the saying is, 'a mother yourself.'

My parents added that no matter what the island was like — and they expected that it was worse than that, anyway! — they wouldn't come and stop on it! I gathered that they wouldn't even go past it in a boat. This pained me; I didn't like the idea of my island being so offensive to them, and I kept on writing cheerful letters which kept on annoying them. All this leads to the fact that I met Clippings in Brisbane and together we went islandward.

Clippings still looked like a nice, sturdy, golden-ruddy schoolboy, indubitably and extremely dear, but he introduced me as 'My wife' with fine carelessness. His was a golden personality expressing itself through a glowing warmth of love. I don't think he had ever even thought about the human soul, and he was not an idealist like Dickie, but he went up and down the earth liking people, and they in return liked him while they defrauded him extremely. He would not merely have shared his last crust with a beggar, but have given the whole of it to the first man, rich or poor, who looked as if he might possibly like it.

And he greeted me with such ardour of joy, and his hands felt so warm and nice, and his eyes danced so, that, although I did not love him in quite the same way that I loved Jerry, I loved him exceeding much.

'You are,' he said, looking at my small plain face and person, 'lovely! lovely! lovely!... What did your people say?' They had at the time said only a tithe of what they finally meant to say, but still, even in an unfinished state, their assertions were crushing, pointed, and uncomplimentary. I told Clippings sadly, trying to soften things a little.

'That's strange,' he commented — 'that's almost exactly what Grandpa said, only he...' Clippings hesitated, face pink and pained; and I took up the thread of his discourse:

'That when you were destitute we could return, and that he would not mind keeping me and all the children there shouldn't have been?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Clippings, and added darkly, 'But I'm damned if I'll go back like that, ever...' He paused. 'I wonder if all mothers and fathers and grandfathers are like that?' he said thoughtfully. 'We shouldn't be, should we?'

I dismissed the idea with proper contempt. Our own attitude to our children — if we had any — would be tenderly benign, no matter what their conduct. This knowledge strengthened our determination never to seek succour of our own harsh parents. We would, however, forgive them and

cherish them. At least Clippings was sure we would; I wanted to, and supposed that one could forgive a person whether they liked it or not, but in their present frame of mind I wasn't at all sure about how we'd manage the cherishing . . .

A week later a chugging motor launch deposited us upon the island; the launch being the last of a series of diminishing craft which had borne us thither. We stood together amongst our piled provisions, and panted. Clippings had known the soft Toowoomba hills, I the sun-bitten bleakness of the Grey Country; we stood now in an effulgent world of strange brilliant peace and light . . . possessing that most compactly magical thing in all the world, a tropical island . . . the divine setting for adventure, for youth, for Love; never to me quite real.

There were wistful brown casuarines against a smoke-blue horizon; ragged, yellow-flowered beach hibiscus among the sedge; umbrella trees lifting candelabras of red-coralled flower with the fire-green butterflies about them; slender-stemmed jungle palms clinging to the cliff-face, their heads set with trailing clusters of beadlike scarlet seed, the noisy, unbelievably white cockatoos fighting in them. There were clear green shallows blotched with purple, and reefs smeared in henna and pink, and a sea of glasslike silver. A little chalk-white beach, that at its northern end was pressed and overlapped by the glistening jungle, brilliant, liv-

ing enamelled with sunlight. The water rolled and shished gently amongst the tiny shells and coral fragments at our feet. The umbrella trees threw luminous embroidery-like shadows, and the immensity of heat beat on the entwined jungle roof, on the drooping hibiscus flowers, on the light-gleaming, pregnant sea.

A single cocoanut palm on the tiny sand spit made a sharp silhouette against the shining water, and the far-domed mountains of Hinchinbrook piled like blue storm-clouds against the southern sky . . . Clippings and I stood blinking in the reflected glare of the beach, and held each other's hands. A big blue butterfly passed like a swift hard-blue flame against the far, rich blueness of the sky and a green soup turtle rose close to the beach, poked its queer snakelike head from side to side, and dived again. Scrub hens called in the jungle-brush . . . There was life and colour and light, and life, life, life, in the glittering tropical air quivering with the diamond fire of noon, in the vine-rioting jungle on the orchid-knotted rocks; life rising from the coloured floor of the sea in pillars and reefs and flower-forms of coral . . . We went and sat in the shade of a many-rooted fig and wiped the perspiration from our faces and smelt the strange scent of the tropics, composed of salt, and heat, and dampness, and rotting life, and growing, rioting life, and fungus and flowers . . . Hot, impelling, exhausting, strangely thrilling, and yet sleepy.

Tim and the Stumpy-Legged Terrier fossicked amongst the bushes, and at intervals the Stumpy-Legged made an utterly unprovoked and venomous attack on Tim's waistcoat, this being the limit of his reach. For some time Tim took no notice, but at the fifth assault he rumbled like a magnanimous mountain.

'I wish,' said Clippings, his forehead puckered with heat and annoyance, 'that you'd call that great elephant of a dog of yours away, Joan; he's got my little fellow fairly bluffed.'

I was for the moment so shattered by this that I obeyed, and Tim came to me, stepping rather high, with the Stumpy-Legged Terrier making bouncing nips at his rump.

'Good little dog,' said Clippings — not to the forbearing Tim, but to his own snarling property — 'Good little dog, don't be frightened.' I had recovered by this time and I arose and spanked the Stumpy One swiftly and well, and then, while his owner scrambled wrathfully to his feet, I bore him kicking across the coral beach and flung him into the sparkling sea. Clippings was waiting to embrace him as he landed and neither of them spoke to me for half an hour or so, but thereafter Tim's chest was invisible to the terrier, although his whiskers always stiffened in the big dog's presence, while his hind leg made small scratching movements.

At the end of half an hour, Clippings said in a

muffled voice: 'You seem to forget, Joan, that the dog is *mine*.'

I said that, on the contrary, it had been a clear cognizance of this fact that had induced me to spank him, realizing that Clippings never would, no matter how pressing the need.

'I don't like any hand but mine to correct him,' said Clippings; and I said that if he occasionally liked that it would be an improvement. He tried hard to think of something appropriate, failed and smiled his infinitely endearing smile. 'We mustn't quarrel on our own little island, Joany dear,' he said with beautiful forgiveness. 'I know you didn't think.'

I had thought — quite a lot of things, and was still thinking a good many, and I was coolly distant when Clippings kissed me. But I had already discovered how hard it was to be protractedly angry with Clippings.

While on the largest of the steamers aforementioned, he had lost ten pounds at poker, to us a financial disaster. But when he told me of it, he spoke so brightly and bravely about staking your all on one throw and losing, and the way that you should behave in such circumstances, that the idea of scolding him seemed irreverent. He later lent 'a poor coot' a 'fiver,' and at this I did protest. Clippings only looked hurt, and said that it was dreadful to come to the stage where you couldn't lend to a man in need. I pointed out that it was

worse to need so much yourself that you had to borrow, and that such was the position in which we should shortly find ourselves. At which stage Clippings smiled his divine smile and offered me a 'chock.' Next day he lent 'a fine chap' a 'quid.'

To return to our island: It was small, some two miles in length and about a mile wide, and it lay amongst the gaily dotted isles of the Family Group, about five miles from the peak-set Queensland coast, and twenty from the Great Barrier Reef, and the friend who sold it to Clippings had said that there was 'a compact little cottage' on it, 'perhaps in slight disrepair.' The Finnish fisherman who owned the launch and garnered oysters in the neighbourhood said that he *had* seen a hut there some years before, and suggested hopefully that we might find it in the lianas and wild ginger at the back of the beach. Indeed, as there had been no cyclones during the period mentioned, he saw no reason why we should not. So having recovered our breath before the general astoundingness of our position, we set out to search.

Back of the sandy sedge, where grew the yellow-flowered hibiscus bushes and umbrella trees, the land rose in a sharp terrace set with great figs, milkwoods, and tall bloodwood trees. We followed what seemed to have once been a path through the wild ginger and ground palms, and reached at last a higher terrace where there showed signs of a clearing about two acres in extent. It was all rank with

young waist-high gum saplings and tall grass and vines, but above them rose the tops of a group of mango trees and the sagging bark roof of the compact cottage. It was certainly compact; it was equally certainly in slight disrepair.

There were in all three rooms; a tiny place that the door opened into, which Clippings called the reception hall, with a tiny window opposite the door, all blocked with tangled ferns; and on either side other doors opening into a kitchen on the one hand and a bedroom on the other. So at least we judged them, for in one was the recess for a stove and in the other the remains of a stretcher. Both were well supplied with windows, and their walls seemed solid enough, great heavy bloodwood slabs — showing that the sea captain had been a fine axeman. The foundations were unimpeachable and the whole house was floored with asphalt composed of tar and coral sand set hard as stone.

But for the roof, as a roof, little could be said, as it hung in rags of rotted bark, but as a condensed lesson in natural history it was a success, being completely covered by assorted slumbering bats, beetles, flies, moths, and tarantulas. Clippings looked at it judicially, and said, with what in any one else would have passed for satire, that he was afraid it would leak if it rained. I shared this opinion so strongly that I walked hastily to the front door and looked out . . . Over the glittering tops of figs and umbrella trees shone the glittering width

of sea, clear silver in the light of the early afternoon. In the middle distance a tiny turreted island laced with ethereal palms . . . Then the blue coast of the mainland, deeply-jungled, peaked with mountains; beyond these again the silver-domed clouds. Just below me the brown-and-purple patterning of our own reefs, and a white reef heron wading . . . The design of a Japanese screen: wonderful, unreal.

Actuality swiftly began to press upon us, however; there was the house to be swept, the spiders to be squashed, and general housekeeping to be commenced. We began joyously, by tearing off the hopeless sheets of bark from the roof and brushing the sound ones into a semblance of peace. Then after we had stretched our two tent-flies over the lot and fastened them down, I swept the walls and floor and Clippings carried up the kerosene cases holding our stores and utensils. Of the cases we later made kitchen shelves, chairs, dressing-tables, wardrobes, bookcases, and other graceful articles of furniture. Indeed, that very afternoon Clippings turned the biggest pickle-case into a dining-table that had to have the lid of a tobacco tin under one leg and the whole tin under the other. He said, happily, how lucky it was that they just fitted, and you can see for yourself that if we had had to put two or three lids under the leg instead of one it might have been awkward. When it was finished and nicely balanced, we spread a newspaper on it and arranged a centrepiece of ferns, and ate quan-

tities of sardines and biscuits. Then we went down to the beach to watch the sunset. It had still been blue-and-silver afternoon as we entered the path under the fig trees, but when we reached the beach the coconut palm stood black, the little sand-waves of the beach were rose and violet, and the still sea a width of rosy silver, while the sun, like a round orange ball floating in a cloudless rosy-amber haze, just touched the tops of the blue mainland mountains. Quivering, interlacing lines of fire ran across the face of the placid sea, and then came a sudden deepening of colours and the sun had gone. The mountains darkened, the sea flushed to ruby fire, glinted with crimson, paled leadenly, and the stars were there . . . So also were the mosquitoes, trillions of them. We had forgotten to bring a lantern, and we stumbled and groped our way back up the little path, and all the hot night scents of the jungle crowded us, and more things than reason, working a priori had deemed possible, bit us in a shorter time. We staggered with tiredness.

'Where did you put the mosquito nets, Clippings?' I asked of my spouse, who was gallantly supporting me with his own small weary arm.

'You *know* how much I love you, Joany dear, don't you?' asked Clippings tenderly.

I did not at the moment recognize this as a danger signal, but later I found that there was something eternally evasive about Clippings. If you reproachfully mentioned the emptiness of the wood-

box, for instance, he adroitly drew, not a red herring, but Love across the trail, and then of course it wasn't Clippings that you were quarrelling with but Love himself, and if you weren't ashamed of yourself you ought to have been, and Clippings just looked on in pained surprise from the ropes . . . At the moment, however, I tried not to think of citronella, and smoke-sticks and mosquito nets, but dutifully to fix my mind on the strength of Clippings's devotion, which really did impress me, as only a man consumed with passion could, it seemed, have thought of anything save the tortured flesh.

'Yes,' I muttered. 'Yes . . . do they go away in winter?'

'There isn't any winter here, darling,' said Clippings, taking a sudden cheerful pride in the superiority of his geographical knowledge. 'There's only the wet season and the dry.'

As I have said, I was both very hot and very tired, and quite unbelievably bitten.

'No winter?' I choked with the injustice of it. 'N-n-no winter at all? . . . Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear!' and I sank amongst the wild ginger and wept.

Clippings knelt beside me and poured brave and tender comfort into my moist swollen ear; he also offered to tuck me into my little bed. Literally stung into action, I struggled again to my feet, and as we entered the compact cottage I repeated my query as to the whereabouts of the nets.

Clippings looked pink and dear and about ten years old and said: 'I was just going to buy them when I got talking to a jolly fellow from Ceylon, and — and I just sort of forgot them.'

'Idiot!' I cried between my tears. 'Idiot!'

'Don't, darling,' pleaded Clippings. 'Not when we love each other so. I'll shoo the skeets away from you . . .'

I spread a rug on the floor, and then, covering myself with another, I laid me down — as I hoped to die. With my last strength hurling a parting revilement at the wretched Clippings: 'If you dare to shoo one mosquito near *me*, I'll kill you,' I said. But I slept at last to the accompaniment of faint swishes.

When I woke in the morning, it was to see a small pyjamaed figure asleep with its back to the wall by my side, and in one hand it grasped a palm frond all worn with shooing.

CHAPTER II

Pertaining to Fish and Coconuts

In the scented warmth of morning I woke Clippings by tickling the end of his nose; when we both laughed, and sat for a while watching the early sun fleck with fairy-gold the ferns outside the window of the reception hall.

Clippings rubbed his eyes with his fists, and then said that we must 'take stock of our position.' So we got a small piece of paper and a stubby pencil, and, sitting on the floor in our pyjamas, did our best to work it out. We had the island, and the fish, oysters, mangoes, and coconuts appertaining thereto; a tiny stove; stores for a month; a small supply of tools and cooking utensils — which I felt later had been more fitly classed as implements of destruction; a very large copper; and quantities of soap; numerous fishing lines, and a small net; a tubby rowboat and some rope; a drum of kerosene, a lantern, and a small carbide light and drum of carbide. These things Clippings said were tangible assets. We had, in addition, five pounds in the bank, and an income of fifteen shillings a week left to Clippings by an old aunt. The problem of supporting life in two humans and 'a dog-and-a-half (liabilities)' as Clippings — earnestly and accurately making estimates — described them, is, even

on a tropical island, one that requires deliberation. But if you have to solve it, there is no better place.

Clippings said that we must begin 'to live on the resources of the land,' and wanted to go fishing on the spot. But as neither of us had ever fished, we decided that it was perhaps wiser to wait until after we had breakfasted and tidied our house, so we raced each other to the beach, still delicate with morning shadows, and splashed in the clearest and greenest of seas, showing its white coral floor through twenty feet of water. The tiny turreted island of the middle distance was more fairylike than ever with all its palms glinting in the morning light, and its golden warmth of reflection sharply staining the delicate blue water. The mainland mountains were purely cut, and there was an unreal stillness over everything . . . A little drift of wandering red leaves went lapping against the beach with the tiny clear ripples, and some of them became marooned on the powdered coral.

After breakfast we began to clear away the gum suckers and vines about the compact cottage, and in so doing excavated the remains of the sea captain's garden. We had thought at first that only the glossy-leaved mango trees remained, but we found some half-smothered brilliant croton bushes, a hedge of double-flowered red hibiscus, a patch of pink-leaved caladiums, and at the southeastern corner of the little square enclosed by the hedge a group of straggling citrus trees, which later proved

to be a long-horned citron, a pink-fleshed pomelo, a mandarin tree, three lemons, and a few dwarf limes. All had been choked by the pushing jungle, and all cried for digging and pruning and weeding, at which we toiled mightily for many days. And then looked upon our work and found it quite delightful, for there was something fascinating and story-booky about our absurd little habitation with its tent-fly roof; its big mango trees with their dark-glistening foliage and pale-yellow fruit, and its hedge set with scarlet flower-balls. All before us was a panorama of palm and sea and mountain that would have suited alike the palace of a prince or Crusoe's stockade, all about us was such towering jungle of great trees and vines, and the cottage was oddly fascinatingly, and, quite unexpectedly, domestic. After we had fixed the stove in place, a thin ribbon of mist-blue smoke rose from the chimney, and showed against great milkwood trees, or the still silver or wind-rippled, violent blue of the sea . . . I liked to catch sight of it rising in the rosy amber evening as we came up from the beach.

At the end of the first week we had finished our packing-case furniture, thoroughly cleared the half-acre of ground inside our hedge, pruned and dug round the trees and crotons, and pegged out our vegetable garden. To be accurate, this latter task Clippings performed alone, and he created a novel and chaste design in the form of the Union Jack; the paths being the stripes. Then he took me

out to study its beauties, and explained the system which you must employ fully to appreciate them. The root, the keynote, the touchstone of the matter, as it were, was to stand in the middle. You might admire it from other angles — indeed, you must admire it from any; but the dazzling flash of full comprehension could come to you only in the middle. So in the middle we stood, and Clippings, very pink and moist from his exertions, pointed out its various perfectnesses. First, to a tap in the centre you could attach a hose — that was, of course, if you had a tap — and then, by simply pulling the said hose down various stripes of the Jack, you could command the whole garden without moving the hose from the tap — that was, of course, if you had a hose. The labour saved in this way, the comfort to the aged or infirm, could be instantly perceived, to say nothing of the economy in taps. In addition, the effect was at once patriotic and pleasing; although, of course, these were but side-issues in practical gardening; the combination of hose and tap were the important features. It really was a good idea, but a subtle misfortune seemed to dog Clippings's inspirations — and many of them were quite brilliant; if he had lived in Nova Scotia, for instance, he would almost certainly have evolved a preventive of sunstroke. His ideas often held the possibility of great usefulness to quite a number of people, but never to Clippings himself. If he had thought of his Union Jack gar-

den anywhere save on an island whose water supply was drawn in a billy from a minute spring, he could have applied it with complete success. As it was, we could only sorrow over the adversity of circumstance . . .

While Clippings worked in the garden I learned to cook, or, more truthfully, I began to destroy various edible substances. I spent some days making yeast, and when at last my ear was gladdened by the first signs of 'poppiness,' I set it tenderly upon the warm stove that its growth might receive no check overnight, and in the morning I forgot to remove it and it boiled. As a result, we ate quantities of scones in various stages of burntness or rawness; boiled rice that stuck together until you could cut it in clear bluish slabs; also stewed mangoes which tasted of kerosene. All these things Clippings consumed with loyal relish, asserting that I was his 'own little wonder' (there was the blindness of a true nobility in Clippings's affection); but I rather agreed with this particular statement, for it seemed to me that without some special powers I simply could not have made normal articles of diet into what they were after I had cooked them.

It had been arranged that one of the small coastal steamers was to 'stand off' once a month with our mail and supplies, but by the end of the third week I had cooked most of our things, and the time had really come when we must live from the land.

I viewed the necessity with certain feminine falterings, but Clippings was rather pleased and quoted numerous instances of Indian braves, turned out on the prairie in winter 'with only their bare hands,' who had yet been plump as partridges when restored to their tribes in the spring, and other stern venturers marooned on lonely isles who had learnt to serve ten-course dinners composed wholly of coconut. We, having no real choice in the matter, prepared to follow in their train, and, carrying the few things I hadn't cooked, went down to the beach for the day, taking fishing lines and oyster knives, the Dog-and-a-Half — who had seen rather lean times of late — following us with expectant springs.

Rounding the sand spit, where grew the casuarines and coconuts, we came to a foreshore of great boulders, and oyster-covered rocks dropping off into deep water.

Clippings said that it looked like a place where one might catch fish; and, alas! it continued to look that way. We may have been in part to blame for this, however, for after lengthy discussion we selected our longest line, and attached something like a small round of salt beef to the hook, and hurled it into the luminous blue-green depths. After taking turns at holding the other end of the line for an hour with no result, we tied it to a palm tree and gathered oysters. When we had a billy full, we went back to see how the line was getting

on, and found it had adhered to the sea-floor as fishing lines will. Clippings, by the way, said that he had very little patience with the ships which are blown unwillingly onto rock-bound coasts when all they need to do is throw out a few fishing lines and defy the maelstrom.

We spent an hour in assorted heaving: we heaved from the south, east, and north, and even attached it to Tim's collar and induced him to swim towards the west. We tried long steady heaves, and short jerky heaves, and little wriggly heaves. At the end of the hour, when we had about exhausted all heavable possibilities, it came up quite easily, bringing with it a frail lovely coral spray, and a yellow and green sea slug. I was interrupted in my contemplation of the slug by the Dog-and-a-Half quarrelling as to who should eat the bait — and hook — which act we were just in time to prevent Tim from performing. After this we felt need of rest and took the oysters and our lunch-basket into a cool sand-floored space between two big grey rocks over which a stunted fig tree sprawled.

Clippings had brought some fresh coconuts, the milk of which he resolved to drink or die in the attempt. This may seem an exaggeratedly dramatic resolve to those who do not know the coconut in its native savagery; the small hairy specimens displayed in shop windows are, of course, harmless enough; and in common with most non-tropical inhabitants I had supposed that they hung on the

trees in this condition ready to be plucked. They do not. As they load the palm, they are encased in five-inch-thick, iron-hard, fibrous armour. They are sharp-ended and very heavy, and it is their desire that they may fall — not to the earth in the soft and poetic manner ascribed to tropical fruits and nuts, but violently upon the head of some pausing resident. If, having survived their descent, you still wish to partake of 'their soft kindly milk,' you must remove their husks.

Clippings and I had already tried various gentle methods and failed abjectly; but to-day, being fortified by the knowledge that several strong souls, unequipped with steam hammers or other ideal tools, had yet derived refreshment from the coconut, we placed one upon the sand and decided to go at the thing systematically.

Clippings spat on his hands — having probably read of it in the 'Boys' Own Annual' — then swung the axe high above his head and brought it down with a really creditable grunt. The blade glanced from the coconut rind and buried itself in the sand, while the nut turned smartly over with its surface perhaps slightly scratched.

I took the axe from Clippings and succeeded in turning it over the other way. After we had practised this for some time, we began to make little bets as to which way it would turn: a homely sport, but interesting. Then we reversed the axe and drove the nut into the sand with the back; we also threw it at rocks.

At last we stood it on end, and in this position succeeded in cleaving it completely in twain, of course spilling its milk. Still we had the nutty part . . . We treated three in this way and left them in the shade to cool, while we ate our oysters with pepper and salt and biscuit; and they were divine oysters, plump and tasty. Then we sprinkled sugar over the coconuts and scraped them with a spoon into fine sweet flakes.

It was cool in the fig-tree shade and we burrowed our bare toes in the coral sand and all beyond was fire-white, and lilac, and blue-and-silver, with the brown smears of the reefs . . . Then as we lay there, one of the loveliest things in the world happened; drifting and fluttering along the beach against the light-pale sea came a love procession of the great green butterflies. The dull-coloured, heavy-bodied female drifted on her way with modest indifference, but all about her flirted and tilted and gleamed the brilliant, unbelievable males, emerald-and-black, exquisite as flying jewels. Now they sank humbly before her, their vivid wings almost touching the white sand, now hung quivering against the distant Peacock Islands, now darted high against the blue of heaven.

At my feet lay a crimson croton leaf which Clippings had dropped there earlier in the day; it was fading, but still a gay blot of colour on the white coral powder, and something about it caught the attention of the butterfly queen. She slowly

circled above it, then, lifting her soft wings, came gently to rest, guarded by the fairy-dance of her lovers. Their green wings turned to metallic blue in the fig-shadow, save where the fire-points of sunlight touched them, when they blazed like real emeralds . . .

That afternoon before the returning tide drove us from our hunting grounds we found some great spider-sprawled shells with mouths like hot lilies. And on the way home, after great labour, we got the husk off a coconut without spoiling it, and drank the milk, salty and sweet.

CHAPTER III

Concerning Efficiency

For five days we lived on fresh fruit and nuts — which is all very well in theory; the Dog-and-a-Half being sustained with flour and water. During this time we fished from all sides of the island, with no result save the discovery of various tiny crystalline, iridescent-floored bays, which you could look down into from the hot grey tops of giant boulders, and big rocks all laced and knotted with orchids — none of which were flowering at the moment — and of green-roofed, tangled, ferny valleys all twinkly with distilled sunlight. We were even tempted to defy the bird protectorate that covers the Northern Islands and shoot the vivid, noisy white cockatoos. A protracted diet of coconut, mango, and oyster breeds a certain outlawry and lack of feeling even in the gentlest; but cockies were so very ornamental that we couldn't shoot them when the opportunity came.

Then in the red evening we caught our first fish. We had pulled far out from the island in our tubby rowboat and anchored over a deep reef; at first just visible far beneath us; a rather creepy-looking purple shadow. But as the evening deepened to sunset the water became mirror-like, and we saw only the reflection of the sky: great wine-coloured

wastes of sea and air set with blue islands . . . Turtles rose and floated meditatively, and sank without sound. To the east, from below the horizon, trailed the smoke of a steamer, and a great drift of flying-foxes passed overhead, their membraned wings making a slight hiss: queer decorative patterns against the deep blue sky. Clippings's tawny hair, boy-face, and old sleeveless shirt and ragged trousers all caught the rosy flush, and he twiddled his bare toes against the floor boards of the boat to the rhythm of a muted tune —

> ''Twas up to yer neck in Killakilla mud,
> 'An' up to yer neck in slaughter,
> Oh, the English gave the Paddys hell,
> At the battle of Boyne water — '

sang Clippings softly; and then he was galvanized into action.

'Joany! Oh, Joan! I've got one!' he cried.

'Not a fish?' I said, having been rendered incredulous by the number of sponges and coral clusters we had caught.

Clippings did not answer, for he was too busy, and our little craft shook and rocked and veered, while I added my strength to the line.

'It must be a shark,' Clippings remarked through his shut teeth, 'or a whale.'

We knew nothing of the niceties of playing a fish, so we simply stuck to the line and hauled, and in slowly diminishing circles we brought our catch to the surface. We had fully expected to find him

twenty feet in length, and as he appeared momentarily some yards from the boat we were gladdened by the fact that he was no longer than my arm. Visions of fried fillets and simmering soup flashed through our minds, and with a final desperate swing we brought him over the side. Then in the pale twilight we gazed upon him with the bitterness of despair. He was not of the sleek and silvery order common to fish-shop windows; he was a large fish, leprous blue, horned and slimy, wearing a girdle of crimson spots about his tummy. He may have been edible; indeed, in the light of later experience we decided that he probably was, but he could not have looked more deadly had he been labelled 'Poison' in Nature's own hand, and flown the Skull and Cross-Bones on his nauseous tail. He slimed and goggled reproachfully on the bottom of the boat, and all the fins which no nice-minded fish would have had waved weedily in the gloaming.

'It's no use keeping him,' said Clippings at last. 'We'd be afraid even to let the dogs have him . . . that is, unless you think it'd be safe to try him on a big dog like Tim.'

I shook my head, too smitten for more forcible protest. It was like parting with our blood, but we removed the hook from his vermilion gullet and prized him overboard with an oar. And the ripples widened out and out, and he doubtless returned to his home in the darkness of the invisible reef.

'Never mind,' said Clippings, 'we'll catch *buckets* of them soon!'

It takes nobility to see your breakfast go in that spirit. I kissed him.

We found upon our return that the picturesque trail of flying-foxes had crossed the five miles of ocean between us and the mainland for the purpose of raiding our mango trees. The night was filled by their squeaks, flappings, thuds, and scuffles, and tragic with the falling of fruit. Clippings went out and shot a lot of stars, the house roof, and some branches, but, so far as we could tell, nothing else. In the morning, however, he found the ugly bodies of three giant bats dead in the trees; and these we skinned and stewed for the dogs, who said that they were very toothsome . . .

The days were so lovely and so alike that you could not tell one from another, and Clippings was so long getting his Union Jack into a condition which he described as 'trued up,' and which required his lying flat on his tummy and glaring down various lengths of string attached to assorted pegs, which he moved slightly to one side and then moved back again, that our first seeds were not sown for a month after our arrival. Now in the West garden paths are raised and the beds sunk, in order that they will hold every drop of water; so we followed the same plan in the Tropics, and did much joyous planting of seed doomed later to a watery death. On the day after the flying-

foxes paid us their first visit, our luck changed. The steamer brought our supplies and we fished again over the deep reef, using shellfish for bait and smaller hooks, and that night we returned singing the Wedding March from 'Lohengrin' — very much out of tune — and weighted by gleaming fish. My cooking had somewhat improved by this time, and we had boiled fish sprinkled with dried parsley, fried fish in golden batter; and, nicest of all, fish cooked in a pie dish with onions. First of all, you put a layer of fish in the bottom of a greased dish, butter and pepper and salt, then a layer of onions, and so on until the dish is full, finishing off with onions. Cover it with a plate until it is cooked, and then brown quickly with the plate off, and you have a savoury gravyey dish of pure lusciousness.

After the era of plenty set in, we had three golden weeks of little joys before the rains came. Sometimes I said that we really ought to get fresh bark for the roof, but Clippings was so goldenly reasonable about the absence of the need for haste, and he had so many things of such moment to do — such as painting her name on the stern of the boat in gold letters, and making a little grass-thatched shed to keep her in, and clearing a wide path to the beach — that I didn't like to disturb him.

We were absurdly happy, and we found frail white wing-shells lined and patterned in rosy pencillings, and smooth leopard cowries under the

ledges of the washing reefs; and made fires on the white beach-sand and roasted potatoes there on moonlit nights, when the sea was milky with light and the jungle black-velvet, or starry-silver where the big leaves caught the moon. Our hibiscus hedge blossomed its gratitude and fenced our small house with a square of deep green leaves thick-set with scarlet posies. And in the scrub near the spring we found some banana palms — with bananas on them! Clippings had a book on banana culture, and he spent a lot of time studying it, such a lot, in fact, that he never got them dug round. But it must not be thought from this that Clippings was lazy; he worked harder than almost any one I have known, but somehow it was always at getting ready to do the things that had to be done before you could do the thing that you had set out to do. He laboured dreadfully, as it were, a dreadfully long way from the beginnings of accomplishment. He said that you must be properly prepared before you began anything: that 'to hurry slowly' was one of the tenets of efficient business: he added that we must be efficient. Being efficient took us quite a dreadful time.

Then one evening the sun sank in the purple and flame of thunder-clouds, and next morning Clippings rose at five to get bark for our roof. He took a whetstone and the axe — which was slightly impaired by continuous opening of coconuts, but still quite 'cutty' — and was so busy 'putting an

edge on it' that he was late for breakfast. When he had finished, he said that to put on an edge you wanted practice; and we, alas, wanted a new axe. He spent the rest of the day scratching himself on brambles and lianas, and climbing cliffs looking for 'a really good bark tree,' and came home dead tired, having found one in about the most inaccessible part of the island. When the question of how we should get it arose, he admitted after reflection that we never could, but said regretfully that his day had been wasted; for which he seemed to think me to blame.

'It's a pity, Joany,' he added gravely, 'that you didn't think of that before.'

Then, because he would have forgiven any one anything, he smiled and did my washing-up for me. After that it really didn't seem worth while doing anything about finding another tree until the new axe came. One night I suggested that we might buy iron, but Clippings explained that we hadn't the money.

'You see, there wasn't much left before we bought the mosquito nets . . . and you *would* have them, Joan.'

'If you hadn't given away half our money, we should have had plenty,' I cried, having just burnt my finger on the stove. 'And if you expected me to live in this climate without nets it's absurd, and, anyway, any one but you would have had the bark on weeks ago . . .'

'If you thought that it ought to have gone on, why didn't you say so?' asked Clippings, deeply hurt. 'I've had such a lot of things to see to I sort of forgot it. You needn't be nasty ——'

'No,' I retorted. 'But I shall be drowned if you can't get some sort of roof on directly.'

Clippings was very fond of argument and always stoutly denied it.

He said: 'Well, I don't see why we should be! I'm not saying this just for argument, Joany, but I really *don't* see why we should. "A tent and fly properly rigged are absolutely waterproof." I've read that a dozen times.'

My temper was never my family's pride, and my finger was hurting horribly.

'I don't care if you've never read anything else,' I cried. 'It *will* leak, and it *isn't* properly rigged, anyway, and every one *knows* that a fly by itself will leak, and all the people who live up here say a tent and fly are no good in the wet season, do you hear? No good! no good! no good!'

Clippings, really startled, did a fatal thing; with shocked sweetness he said: 'Don't get excited, Joany darling.'

I said: 'You would get excited if you had come to an uninhabited island with the most aggravating thing ever created.'

As soon as I had said it, I felt mean and cruel and ashamed, as I had long ago when I whipped a puppy for tearing my dress.

Clippings went white, and his lips quivered miserably.

'P'r'aps I am aggravating,' he said, and then his tendency to argue flickered in him. 'But truly I can't *see* it,' he added.

I held out my hand: 'I was horrid, and of course it isn't true.'

Clippings frisked once again; and as we sat on the moonlit doorstep and made it up, he said happily: 'As soon as the axe comes, Joany, I'll . . .' I thought that he was going to say 'get the roof on,' but he didn't. He said, 'I'll build you a bosca fern house. You're so fond of ferny things . . .'

Presently he added: 'I'll be thinking of the plan for it; if you do these things at all, you want to do them *efficiently*.'

CHAPTER IV

Of the Old Orchard

Almost every evening the storm-clouds rumbled and churned about the horizon, and a sense of oppression, of waiting, was added to the burden of heat that pressed on the brilliant world of the coast. There were fewer flowers; life was less exuberant, and the more succulent things drooped and wilted as they stood. Vague discomfort filled the jungle; and tinges of unwonted brown spread to the heart of the island. On an evening of great, still heat we sat listlessly on the beach and played with the warm sand. A hot purplish haze lay over the distant mangrove swamps and mountains, and in the pale, hot sky the great pink piles of thunder-clouds heaped, while all things were perfectly mirrored in the still sea. Presently round the sand spit draped with brown casuarines came a slowly paddled boat. We found it to be owned by soft-skinned brown natives from the Palm Islands Mission looking for work in the orange orchards farther up the coast. Big, merry, soft-voiced, lazy fellows, who, even in their tattered European clothes, fitted into the tropical dusk as Clippings and I never could. They sold us half a green turtle for a tin of tobacco, and then we persuaded them to stop and rebark the roof of our cottage. Clippings was rather hurt by the

idea at first, but when he thought it over he realized that if he did it himself it would take him away from numerous things that needed his attention, and that it was more efficient where possible to hand manual work over to the simple aborigine who was unfitted for skilled labour. When this had been arranged, we left our new employees camped on the sand spit and walked up to the house, bearing our rather gruesome portion of turtle. From the edge of the trees I looked back and saw the dark figures squatted round their little fire, which threw a rosy light over the trailing casuarine boughs, and splashed with warmth the dark sea. They sang harshly, monotonously, with a strange barbaric power the words of some mission hymn:

'Lord! O God of 'Osts, we pray,
Gran' us, when we come to die,
Light at eventide . . .'

We climbed the little path, where the thick darkness of the jungle muffled sound. But as we turned again at our door we heard, above the far rolling of thunder, the singing of the mission hymn:

'Gran' us light at las', O God,
Nought 'ave we but Thee, O Lord . . .'

There was something rather terrible in the sound of it, rising from beside their little fire on the white sand spit, with the dark water all about. It seemed the cry of a people dispossessed, being driven back into the old sea . . .

'Gran' us, when we come to die,
Light at eventide.'

Next day they stole our mangoes; ate most of our provisions; smiled at us with lovely teeth, and put one sheet of bark on the roof. And that night they sang again of having naught save God; but, surveying our ravaged larder and stripped mango tree, we knew otherwise.

After they had eaten the last tin of jam and the last least greenest mango, they finished the roof with cheerful alacrity, bade us friendly farewell, and left — with our best fishing lines. During their stay they had, however, taught us many things. One Tommy Sandy-Cape watched me with obvious amusement while I attacked a coconut in the manner described aforetime. Presently he rose from the tamarind shade where he had been reclining, and, advancing with leisurely grace, took the axe from me. He then cut a gum stake about three feet long, sharpened it at both ends, and drove it deeply into the earth. Then, taking the coconut in both hands, he brought it down lightly on the point of the stake, gave it a wriggle or two and removed the husk. He went on doing it with graceful leisure while I watched him reverently. They showed us how to build a sapling fish trap in the bay; much on the principle of a wire mouse-trap. And the island seemed deserted when they had gone. Also our diet was very simple until the coming of our next steamer.

Our share of the turtle had proved a horrid problem. My standby, 'The Healthy Home is Happy' cook book, shedding no light on the matter, we were thrown upon our own resources (most precarious things). And after quarrelling violently as to the most desirable methods, we baked some of the rather piglike flesh — for untold hours, before it showed signs of yielding. When done, it smelt dreadfully and tasted like some strange, rather delicious combination of pork and fish.

Being ambitious, however, we were not content with this. In our minds from childhood, the height, the tottering pinnacle of luxury, had been personified by turtle soup, and turtle soup I strove to make. I boiled that turtle with loving tenderness: I boiled every conceivable part of him. And the result was an evil-smelling, oil-specked green wateriness. I wept; but as I did not want to disappoint Clippings, I served him with a plateful at dinner. Clippings was the heart of loyalty, but I suppose that soup was a shock to any one who had not become immune, as it were, through constant sipping. He gasped and said with perfect gravity in a muffled tone:

'Joan, I . . . I'm afraid you've given us the washing-up water . . . in mistake . . .'

When I explained sadly that there was no error, that what was now before him was the soupest thing that I could make out of the turtle, he was torn with repentance, and said that turtle soup

must be an acquired taste peculiar to the idle rich. If that did explain the mystery, it just shows what the idle rich can acquire a taste for.

Years later, Jerry told me of turtle soup served at an officers' dinner in London, and according to him it outrivalled even the dishes of Alice in Wonderland, in the rarity, the exquisite variety of its flavours. His description would have made a dyspeptic hungry; but then Jerry always had a low habit of telling me about the ravishing things he had eaten — beginning it when I was a small, miserable, hungry child recovering from the measles.

We offered my soup to Tim and he ate it; but then he would lap castor oil at my request, announcing with his spotted tail the while that he knew that I knew best.

Our roof was on, but just in time. One night when we went to bed the dark sky was filled with bright hot stars, but later we were wakened by the muffled roaring of a thousand drums: the rains had come!

The roof held well, for a bark one, and we had only to stand a few kerosene tins about to catch the drips. The disconcerting part of the wet season was the way in which everything grew and crawled. Blue mould fell upon our flour and dried peaches; assorted fungi sprouted from our boots; and all the various and innumerable crawlynesses of the island took shelter in our compact cottage. It rained, not

in sheets, or drifts, or drops, but in one steady, terrific downpour. The hollows became lakes, the paths rivers, every ledge of rock a waterfall, and things moulded and grew, and grew and moulded, and wriggled . . .

This lasted for two months with occasional vapour-laden, steaming pauses. The muddy tide of fresh water drove the fish from the bay, and again we knew lean times. Our garden, in which we had laboured so, was drowned and lost in washing mud. Our precious tools rusted. Still, for all its discomforts, you could forgive the wet season because of the lovely sound of it at night: such secret, roaring darkness, in which there is such sweetness in the security of bed, while all outside hangs the dark curtain of rain; pouring over the familiar trees, into the hidden jungle, and blending with the black mysterious night-world of the sea. Rain, rain, steady and ceaseless! I loved to lie awake and listen to it, although it held in its roar something of the frightening, ceaseless passage of life . . . It drummed on the bark roof, and ran from the eaves, and drenched noisily through the mango boughs. But the most insistent sound of all was the gurgle, gurgle, gurgle, of water seeking the sea . . . And I thought of all the lives in the world, different as the rain sounds, and yet all being hurried, hurried, hurried . . . by what? Whither? Old, old thoughts — yet trivially young in comparison with the sound of hurrying water.

I thought sometimes, too, of Dickie in his little iron house, with the egg-stains on his heavy boots, hating the old man who loved him best in the world: of his young, haggard face bent above the little bundle on the chair seat . . . and I tried not to think of him, because no matter how we love people there is so very little that can be done for them. I thought of Jerry with his restless hands and laughing lips; unhappy because he could not have the one small thing he wanted. But, although Jerry might be unhappy, he had a quality that makes for salvation, in that he could see the humour of all things, even himself; he possessed the infinite strength of laughter . . . Dear laughing mouth and joyous step, and quick flash of understanding! . . . There was all at once a great loneliness in the sound of the rain; but, in moving, my hand brushed against Clippings, and his fingers closed about it; warm, loving.

The rains departed, leaving a flashing, teeming, exuberant world of sunlight. We replanted our tiny garden, and incredibly soon it was bright with the tender green of lettuce and spinach, turnips, carrots, and beetroot, while young sweet corn waved in the sunlight, and melon and pumpkin and squash vines seemed to spread yards in a single day. We planted mushrooms, and tomatoes, and peas, and cabbages . . . and then, quite suddenly, just as we had come to love our small bright island exceedingly, the whole thing ended.

We were busy at the time with countless plans for increasing our income. I hoped to do press work of some sort, or even write fiction; Clippings proposed, if need be, to take work in the sugar mills or meat works down the coast for a part of the year, the wages being very high; and in addition he could do book work and income tax returns for the various cane farmers and orchardists. An aged recluse, who dwelt in a patch of bananas on the mainland, offered to take care of the island during our absences in return for his rations and tobacco.

Still, we had come so to love our tiny home that we wanted to grow rich without leaving it, even for a little while. Clippings had heard, amongst other things, of a deserted orange orchard on the mainland, some seven miles to the north, from which we thought money might be made; and thither we ventured in our dinghy on an oil-calm day of autumn. Reaching the orchard, and the tide being out, we left our boat anchored by a large stone on the weed beds a hundred feet from the beach, then scrambled our way through the beach scrub and the tangled vines into the remains of the plantation. It covered some seven acres and rose to the crest of a small sharp hill. Up this we climbed, panting in the noonday sun, and once at the top, we rested beneath a big mandarin tree, and looked back. There were the original trees, gnarled by the passage of time, and about them their chil-

dren 'to the third and fourth generation,' and all were loaded and gay with fruit: most of it poor in quality, but brilliant and picturesque past belief: blood-orange of mandarins, pale and bright yellow oranges; the thin high note of lemons. Beneath the trees piled fruit in all stages of decomposition. Deep green, and varied gold, the orchard sheltered us from the sun, and fell steeply beneath us to the sea; deep blue, set with green and lilac islands.

All through the trees played and ravaged the white cockatoos; flutteringly alighting in a golden tree, there to uptilt and twist, and at intervals nip the stalk of some fruit, and listen with uplifted crest to the plunk of its fall. Palms sprouted soaringly above the orange trees, and many were smothered in vines, or sickening in the shade of some rapid-growing forest giant, while about the edges of the clearing the jungle had reclaimed its own. But still there were hundreds of orange trees, and the cockatoos played and ravaged among their tons of wasting fruit. A strange, careless, lavishly beautiful picture, that only the tropics could offer . . .

We roamed and ate and planned all through the golden heat of afternoon . . . The orchard had been abandoned because of the uncertainty of transportation. But now the coastal railway was blasting its track along the hills only twelve miles inland, and it seemed to us that, with its coming, the almost vacant stretch of wonderfully fertile coast

between Cardwell and Innisfail would become valuable, and that with it must come also the possibility of profit from the old orchard. We played with the thought of buying it on deposit and working off the price; of getting some one to finance us and repaying them by degrees . . . and it was dark when we recrossed the beach, having squabbled about the position of the boat, and made our individual ways through the scrub. I was nearer right than Clippings by a hundred yards, and between me and the white blur of the dinghy stretched about ninety feet of dark lap-lappy water. There was no avoiding a swim, and, as I had arrived first, I felt in honour bound to make it; Clippings was taking thorns out of his legs farther up the beach.

'Wait a minute, I'll be there, and swim for her,' he enjoined cheerfully. Clippings possessed no nerves.

I looked at the oily-black water, just touched with starlight, and the dim white shape of the boat, and I was dreadfully scared, but Dickie had — much against my inclinations — imbued my infant mind with certain uncomfortable ideals of conduct, such as the necessity of going ahead when you're afraid (which I felt applied strongly to the present case, for I would like to have met any one afraider than I was at the moment), and also I was a much better swimmer than Clippings. So I thought of the heroines of history — with knocking knees — and plunged with all the splash I could make.

I swam fast and tried not to think of sharks and sword fishes and wavy weed beds, and to resist the tendency to go feeling with my toes for what was beneath me. And after eternal years I grasped the dinghy side, and for a moment stood upright, treading water. Then, just as I was about to lift myself aboard, my foot bumped something hard and slimy and *alive*, and a red-hot iron seemed to close about my ankle. I lost my grip with the unexpected pain of it, and fell back helplessly. Feeling sure that my foot was gone, I gave a silly, whimpering cry, and then floundered miserably.

'What's the matter?' shouted Clippings. 'Oh, Joan! Where are you?'

'A . . . a shark's got my foot,' I wailed.

'Never mind,' said Clippings, 'I'm coming.' (To enjoin a person not to mind in such circumstances was like Clippings, and perhaps a little futile, but cheerfully to seek their society — and the alleged shark's — through absolute darkness takes courage.) I think that I must have fainted from pain, for I don't remember any more until Clippings was striking matches in the bottom of the boat to look at my feet. Then he gave a little choked laugh: 'Why, Joany dear, it's nothing . . . you're not hurt,' he said. 'Oh, I was *afraid* you were hurt . . .' He stooped to kiss my wet ankles with joyous lips. And at the touch I screamed and almost fainted again.

CHAPTER V

Of the Fictional Half-Crown

I sometimes wonder why man, who so loves to twiddle his toes in the sun and meet the shock of white water over the tide-rocks, binds himself to the thousand renunciations of marriage. I suppose because he can't help loving some small commonplace woman any more than the woman can help aching for some nice mediocre man. Anyway, his love for me took Clippings's little island from him; and, although it was not my fault, I couldn't help feeling mean in some obscure but poignant way . . . He had loved it so with its yellow beach flowers and gay reefs. And you see, although the old gentleman fra' the Hielan's was so stately, Clippings's people were very poor, and from the time that Clippings was quite little he'd been sat so goodly at an office desk — while his small soul ached for crocodiles.

If you could unbutton the neatly brushed, meagre waistcoats of the little neat clerks streaming into the cities every morning and peep at their hearts'-dream, I wonder what it would generally be? Not the hurried lunch and dutiful office surely? Man is still too much the child, loving wooden-battle-axe and broom-handle-charger, for that: and it always seems a shame somehow to keep him in stiff collars

doing sums his life long. It seemed — ah, me — so cruel a shame to take Clippings back and shut him up again, but my foot would not get well. Although on the skin there had shown at first only a tiny puncture, the ankle swelled and darkened, and I lay for long weeks in the Townsville Hospital. Nobody knew what had bitten me, but every one save me found it a delightful subject of speculation. The doctors said that it might have been a giant sting ray, and that if so sting rays' stings were poisoned with so and so, and they (the doctors) ought to inject such and such. The only drawback to this was that it might not have been a sting ray at all, but some unknown poisonous jellyfish. At the end of two months, it was less painful and I was allowed to hobble about with crutches, but the doctors said that the bone was affected and that I was most likely ultimately to lose my foot; in any case a cure would involve months of treatment. Clippings, who had taken temporary work in Townsville, sat by my bedside one warm evening; his clenched hands between his knees, and his head drooping dejectedly. He looked, for Clippings, very tired and old.

'You'll have to see the doctors in Sydney, Joan,' he said; then continued, with sudden anger, 'They shan't have my darling's little foot.'

I asked how we could go, being penniless.

'There's the island,' said Clippings. 'We can sell it. After all,' he added, rather uncertainly,

'it's only an island . . . I'll get some office job in Sydney.'

I thought of all the little crystal bays floored by the bright coral life, and of Clippings lying on his tummy on some hot rock peering down into them with such boy's excitement: of potato roastings in the white moonlight . . . and of the bare efficiency of offices filled by the click of typewriters, and I felt mean and said so.

'It doesn't matter,' said Clippings, retiring to his final argumentative-stronghold-for-all-contingencies, '*I love you:* and of course we've got to go . . .'

So we sold it; with all its beauty of dark palm and bright rock and changing sea — for our fare to Sydney and a few spare pounds. I grieved over it bitterly, but not, I think, as Clippings grieved, to whom life was sharply divided into 'the Bank' and 'the island'; the island holding all Romance and Freedom and Joy. Still, as I have said, he was the soul of loyalty, and he never openly expressed one regret. Only when I asked what sort of man had bought it, he said, with bitterness, '*A horrid cow!*' As Clippings always classed any one, who did not greet him with obscene language or a clenched fist, as 'A jolly cove,' and any one who did as 'a poor coot,' I assumed that the buyer must have some positively inhuman quality, and asked what it was.

'Oh, nothing . . . I just didn't like him,' Clip-

pings admitted. 'I shouldn't have called him a cow . . .'

Then I understood that the man's crime lay only in all the joy of which he had taken possession.

We dedicated our fifteen-shilling income to the dogs' board, and left them with a police magistrate — in the casual way that one is forced to leave dogs; it being impossible to explain matters to them. Left them to fret out their loyal doggy hearts over their desertion until we could afford to send for them.

The innumerable successful men of fiction and autobiography who have first sighted some city with half a crown in their pockets have somewhat sated the public taste for such entrances. But the reality does hold certain memorable excitement. I know, because Clippings and I tried it. At least, we landed in Sydney with ten shillings and fourpence (no blame attaches to any one who does not realize the importance of fourpence under these conditions. It was some days before we really appreciated it ourselves).

My foot seemed unaccountably better on the day of our arrival, and, with the support of a stick and Clippings's arm, I limped along at about the pace of an athletic snail. But my only pretension to grace had been snatched away; for one thing I had done well, just one, and that was walk. As we left the railway station, I caught sight of us both in a

tilted mirror, and almost laughed at the thought of Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore's horror could she have seen me; a small, thin, ugly woman with shadowed eyes, and face touched with the dreadful yellow that sickness brings to the deeply tanned, wearing a shabby hat, and a dress very much out of fashion. Then I caught my breath with pure love, for Clippings was regarding me with proud, sunny tenderness: his reflected face very good to look upon. I smiled at him, and he pressed my arm and helped me along with infinite gentleness.

Once out of the station, we stood at the head of the rampart and looked out over the huddled grey city, very sharp in the chill spring sunshine. Usually, when one so looks, one has some definite objective to reach, or at least the choice of but a few hotels. Clippings and I were perfectly free; we could go anywhere; the only question being what we should do when we got there. Then, in black upon a white ground and at no great distance, we saw 'People's Palace.' When your fortune can be reckoned in shillings upon the fingers there is something appealing in the idea of a Palace, even a 'People's' one. Also it was connected with the Salvation Army, and in our minds the Salvation Army was connected with respectability and economy (and at that stage of our adventure we wanted to be respectable).

Clippings said, 'Shall we take a tram?' We

talked in this wild sort of way at first. Finding, however, that the only trams which passed the Palace door came towards the railway station, we decided to walk. As I have said, we were extravagant in those first days, but as we walked we discussed the advisability of taking a single room. Clippings said he could easily sleep on the floor with rugs; that was, if the Salvation Army didn't think it an unsaved sort of thing to do.

We stopped for frequent rests and to look at the first spring flowers in the garden beside the rampart, and later at the shop windows in Pitt Street. And in one of these there was an array of stencilled panels, Japanese in treatment; some showing coloured leaves or flowers; and one, the most artistic, representing a junk on a tropical sea . . . There was the glimmer of bright rocks, and white birds about the grey-weathered boat, and wonderfully blue water. It really had caught something of fervent noon. We looked at it long and earnestly and then turned away shivering in the spring wind. Arrived at the Palace door, Clippings ascertained that there was no objection to two people sharing a single room, one paying only 'stretcher rates.' It eventuated later that Clippings had not made it clear that in this case one person was a woman.

Our room was small and cell-like and very clean, and many stories up, and it looked out into a desolate concrete well giving light to many other windows. I lay down on the small iron bedstead,

and Clippings went back to the railway for our things, and to buy two pies — further evidence of the exceeding recklessness with which we lived.

Presently a woman's voice asked admission. 'I 'ave,' she said, 'got yer clean towels, sir.'

My stick had fallen beyond my reach, and the door being fastened on the inside I asked her to wait.

There was a faint squeaking gasp. Then, in tones not unmixed with righteous indignation, she said: 'Was that a *woman* spoke?'

'Yes,' I said, mildly surprised, 'I did.'

There was another squeak, followed this time by something resembling a snort, and a muttered exclamation to the effect that the lady of the towels had 'thought as much,' and before I could reach my stick there was a hushed babble of voices at my door, punctuated by cries of 'Captain!'

Being unacquainted with Salvation morality, I felt sure that a murder had been traced to my hands, and when the thunderous knocking of 'Captain' was added to the hue and cry without, I was really shaken.

'Open this door!' said he.

I cried in faltering tones that I couldn't.

'It's no use your going on that-a way,' said Captain firmly. 'You've come to the wrong place, my lass.'

'I was afraid, Captain, as it was the same trouble as we'd had before,' said the lady of the towels. 'Only I didn't *like* to think it . . .'

I remembered the painful day on which I had been a 'shock' to my grandmother, and felt that in some manner unexplained I must now have given the Palace a 'turn.'

'Open the door!' commanded the Captain.

Completely innocent of what I was doing in the 'wrong place,' or what the trouble was that I was allegedly repeating and seeking only to placate my accusers, I cried desperately: 'Just wait 'til I get my stick and I'll open it!'

There was a hushed 'Oh,' and a murmur of 'Hear that, Captain.'

'Look here, my good woman,' he said in a tone that suggested the Black Maria and prison bars, 'you come along peaceable with me, and there won't be no further trouble, but if you threaten violence, you'll regret it.'

At this stage I reached my stick and hobbled hastily across the room, and, pale-faced and actually trembling, opened the door. There was a long, hushed pause and then a peal of giggling, sternly repressed by the Captain.

He said: 'I — I thinks there's been a mistake.'

He was an immense, kindly, ruddy soul, and I smiled at him in my relief; when with sudden and highly masculine injustice he turned upon the gaping lassies and maids.

'What,' asked the Captain, 'is the meaning of this ridi*cu*lus scene? A invalid lady to be troubled this way! Dear, dear.'

The shamed lassies disbanded in haste, and the Captain turned to me with ponderous courtesy: 'You see, Miss, it come about' — he lowered his voice discreetly — 'through you being in a single man's corridor and them girls . . .' he tapped his forehead. 'But seeing you I see at once it's a mistake . . .'

Light dawned upon me; and I, too, saw how impossible it would be, even for the zealous, to connect me with anything but the most innocent and domestic of lives. The poor lassies had expected a peroxided peach-cheeked Venus . . . and I emerged!

I explained all things to the Ruddy-and-Benevolent, and he explained to me that even the most respectable of us 'see hard times.' Then he offered me his arm and led me round the corner of the corridor to where the 'Double Rooms' were; in which I became automatically respectable. (Unfortunately, respectability was, as always, expensive.)

When Clippings came back with our rugs and pies, having recovered sufficiently to see certain gleams of humour in the affair, I told him of what had happened, but *he* saw nothing funny about it. Indeed, he was full of wrath against the people who had treated his 'darling' in such a way. I explained that they could hardly be expected to know that I was a darling, particularly through a closed door. But Clippings didn't agree. He said

that they should have known the moment they heard my dear little voice; which, by the way, no one had ever admired except Clippings.

We ate our pies and drank some water and then peeped out of our window into another narrow concrete light-well; a drab, sad place, save that in the window opposite to ours there was a golden glory of daffodils and a little green bowl of early violets. Into the cold efficiency of the light-well they brought colour and sweetness and unexpected Joy-of-Spring.

We speculated romantically as to the owner of the room, and were finally left hesitating between Clippings's theory that it belonged to a sweet little country maid, forced to dwell in the cold walls of cities to support her white-haired father, and my contention that some boy-poet had placed them in his window as reminder of the ethereal brilliance of life which he glimpsed only in the pauses of labour. Clippings was just saying that she must have been given the flowers by some lover whom she could not marry because her life was dedicated to her father, and I was wondering if he, my young Keats, starved himself in order to buy flowers, when a kindly wrinkled yellow face and a pair of brilliant almond eyes appeared above the gaiety of daffodils, and an old Chinaman smiled at us with celestial friendliness. Then to the gold-and-purple he added a little basin of Japanese plum-blossoms, fragile-white, veined in pink and rose . . .

Clippings had bought a paper, and tiring of the window we studied the 'Positions Vacant' column, and wrote out nice neat answers to advertisements on a new writing-pad, and sealed them in envelopes that had to have dreadfully expensive stamps on them.

Clippings said: 'It's as well to answer them all, and then we can make our choice afterwards . . . it's hard to really make up your mind by letter.'

We dined on half a cold sausage and a loaf of bread, and made some cocoa with the hot water in the bathroom, hoping that no one would see us. That night, even with our rugs, we were cold, and we cuddled together for warmth, and Clippings dilated upon the fires and radiators we should have in our future home — dear eternal optimist! Next morning we went to the general hospital and gave a learned grey-haired surgeon a letter from the Townsville doctor, and he poked and prodded and twisted my foot and said that he thought with care it would be all right; whereat the tears came into Clippings's eyes, making them very bright and blue, and he squeezed my hand whenever he thought the doctor wasn't looking. It would, however, be months, said the surgeon, before I could use it freely, and I must come to the hospital for treatment every day.

We should have liked to go down to the busy harbour, but Clippings must answer 'Apply Personally' advertisements; so he left me in the little

room that looked out onto the concrete light-well, and presently a little draggled chambermaid came to polish the floor. She began by remarking that she saw that I had 'had trouble, too,' and went on to tell me, in the pauses of linoleum cream and startling backward jerks executed in a kneeling position, of how saved she was now and how bad she had been. I didn't mind the saved part so much, but she gave me the badness in interminable detail, and second-hand sin needs to be quite exceptionally sinsome to be worth while. However, she said that it did her good to meet some one like me to whom she could 'unbussum' herself; that it made her feel 'real lifted.' It is only just to mention that the sins she had committed were as nothing to the ones that a vicious world had tried to force upon her. It was really astonishing the number of Bank Magnates and Shipping Kings who had devoted almost their entire lives to trying to beguile that little maid. They had shrunk neither from the expenditure of fortunes running into the five figures, the abandonment of wives and families, nor untold villainy. From all these snares, temptations, and pitfalls she had, however, escaped, only to succumb to 'forbidded and humble love.' It was, she said, her heart that did it. It took her up and carried her along and swept her right away. She asked, not unreasonably, what you were to do in a case like that? But as I didn't feel my inexperienced self qualified to advise her,

she gave a final swirl of polish and shunted away down the passage, still with the same disconcerting backward jerks, pausing only to mention that at times her stomach 'got' her, and 'jumped terrible,' but that her case was better than that of an unfortunate friend who had recently lost her kidneys in a moment of nausea. Poor little maid, her hands were so cracked with the cold that they bled at the knuckles, but I think she was happy with her vivid past.

When Clippings came in, he was rather crestfallen.

'There's no need to worry, Joany-sweet,' he said, sitting on the bed and dangling his legs, 'but there seem to be just dozens of chaps after every job: I'll have to get there earlier, and . . . and, you see, I haven't got a reference from the Bank, for I left suddenly, and, anyway, the manager was a great friend of Grandpa's, and he said I had behaved undutifully . . .'

Poor little Clippings, who had sat so obediently on his little stool for such long years!

Some days later, he blushed and then said, almost in a whisper, 'It's — it's rather dreadful, Joany, but I'm afraid we'll have to *pawn* something.' After a while we got used to the idea, but in the first grimness of necessity we were staggered. Nice people did not pawn things: so far as we knew, only degenerate sailor men and wicked dukes ever even thought of it. We looked so dismayed that,

seeing each other's faces, we suddenly laughed; and began to discuss what manner of things you could pawn. Gold watches and dress suits seemed to be the only things I'd heard of, but Clippings thought that he had read sea stories wherein — after the murder had been committed — the villain pawned jade gods, pearls, and inlaid daggers. None of these things had we about us.

'Could you go and look in a pawnshop window?' I suggested.

Clippings straightened his tie, brushed his coat, and said hopefully: 'If any one saw you, they'd only think you were wanting to buy something' — and fortified by this assertion left to reconnoitre.

As afore mentioned, Clippings had a passion for efficiency. When he returned, it was with a small black notebook from which he read: 'Suitcases, hats, overcoats, rings, corsets, false hair, perambulators' . . . he paused and said: 'Do you know, Joany, in one window there was the loveliest tiny baby's cradle. All lace and ribbons and things . . . just think of having to pawn that! It was such a dear little cradle . . . not just an ordinary kind of a one . . . Razors, stockings . . .'

In the light of this further knowledge we reviewed our small possessions, and at last decided on my grey fur, a last gift of my mother's, and the suitcases.

'Oh, Joany, fancy having to pawn something *you've* worn . . . P'r'aps your people were right and you shouldn't have married me.'

I comforted him, but if truth be told I felt that it was very bright and brave of me to part with my sacred fur in this way, and after Clippings had gone I shed a few tears about it, and because my foot was hurting. Necessity is, however, the death warrant of sentiment: a week later we pawned my wedding ring with the single regret that wedding rings weren't worth more, and that we had not got the other five.

Clippings returned from his first venture dishevelled but triumphant.

'It was rather dreadful, Joan,' he told me. 'But not *so* dreadful as you'd think. The man didn't seem surprised or anything, and he didn't stare at me . . . at least not much' — his eyes shone proudly. 'And he only offered me a pound, and — and I made him give me *thirty shillings*.' He mopped his forehead at memory of the encounter. 'I argued like anything!' said Clippings, and, thinking of the terrors of arguing with a real live pawnbroker about something you were going to pawn, I regarded him with new admiration. The thirty shillings would pay for our room for a fortnight; so we handed it in at the office before the temptation of spending it should overpower us. Of our original ten and six we had sevenpence left.

'That,' said Clippings, calculating with a fragment of pencil, 'will buy a penny loaf and a quarter of a pound of sausage . . . Or ought we to do without that and just have the bread and some cocoa?

Bread is very nice dipped in cocoa,' he added brightly.

I said — knowing it was weak: 'Sausage is delicious . . .' (We had breakfasted and dined and breakfasted again on bread and cocoa, and somehow I didn't feel as hopeful about its charms as Clippings.) When he came back with our provisions, he told me of the disappointment he had had.

'You see, I asked for a quarter of a pound, and there was the end of a sausage lying there, and the man weighed it and it was nearly half a pound, and he looked at it as though it wasn't worth while cutting it, and then he said, "You asked for a quarter, sir?" and I had to say "Yes," and he cut it.'

We sliced our bit of sausage to make it last. Clippings wanted to make me eat all of it, and observed how fond he had always been of bread and cocoa, and how nice our present brew of half-warm, semi-raw wash was; he said, indeed, with perfect sincerity that it made you wish you could give some to all the poor coots who had nothing.

CHAPTER VI

We Find a Lucky Sixpence

We lived at the People's Palace, somewhat undernourished, for a month, and every morning the old Chinaman put fresh flowers in his window. And we learnt many things: the taste of bread with a little sugar sprinkled on it, and of bread without any sugar, and of plain nothing. Of the delicious flavours that may be discovered in a tin of bully beef, and the delight of raspberry jam when you can afford it. Clippings perfected the art of shaving innumerable times on one razor blade, and while at first he wore a clean collar every day, he later went back through the lot turning them inside out. After the last one had been turned and worn, he began cleaning them with bread, which he said seemed such a waste. His boots wore through in the endless tramping to answer advertisements; but fortunately his feet were leathery from much barefoot padding across beach and jungle. He kept the tops of the boots immaculately glossy, but, as he said, you had to be very careful not to tilt your foot up while talking to a man in his office.

'I generally stand,' said Clippings, 'just to make sure . . .'

After we had pawned the rugs, we were very cold

at night for a while, but Clippings said that you could feel the heat coming every day, and that it would soon be so summery that we shouldn't know how to keep cool.

'It is,' he admitted once, 'just a little bit awkward not being able to take trams or busses, for sometimes you get to a job so late . . .' It didn't matter much with the office jobs, he explained, but lately he had taken to presenting himself as a hod-carrier, or road-breaker, or bricklayer. These avocations were not so crowded as the office openings, but there were always enough bulging, muscular navvies in grey flannels and immense boots to settle Clippings's chances. They were also in the habit of asking Clippings rude but not unfriendly questions as to what party he was attending.

One night I wrote to my people giving them the G.P.O. as our address, and asked them if they would like to buy the ponies given me long ago by Jerry. We waited eagerly for the result, but when a cheque came for twenty pounds we could hardly believe it, and were just feeling rich when another letter came, and we found that they 'had no use' for the ponies, but that, as they realized we were really asking for money, they sent twenty pounds as a gift . . . They added that, in regard to any further debts we had to meet, we need only be frank and they would defray them. They still further added, with caustic comment, that they had always foreseen this state of things. So we

did up our cheque and sent it back again, and said that they were quite mistaken and we were very comfortable. And Clippings had to go on walking in his worn boots.

Then one day, not having had overmuch to eat, he felt faint and sat down on the pavement edge, and in so doing exposed the vanished soles of his boots and the little pavement-worn soles of his feet. A big workman put his hand on his shoulder and asked what the trouble was, and Clippings's eyes filled with tears and he explained (doubtless upon his middle fingers) all about the island and my foot, and of all the miles he had walked for nothing. The big man told him how useless it was for him to hunt manual work in such clothes, and then, with perfectly natural friendliness, he lent him five shillings 'for the little woman.' He said Clippings could return it if he was ever able to, and it was only when Clippings had got away that he remembered he hadn't asked the big man's name. He ran all the way back, but the man was gone . . . Clippings, who had lent so often and so gladly of whatever small wealth he possessed, rushed in, stammering and flushed, and almost unbelieving: 'Think, Joan, he didn't know me from a bar of soap and he couldn't tell if I was lying, and he was out of work, too, and, oh, Joan, he lent me five shillings! . . . Oh! what fine fellows you do strike!'

We had about reached bed-rock that day; our

last pawnable thing was pawned, neither of us had breakfasted, and we owed for two nights' rent on our room. But the five shillings gave us heart again. And blushing with not unmerited shame I produced a little bundle of manuscript.

'Clippings,' I said, 'I've written some poems quite dreadful, but a paper might take them . . .'

Clippings was enraptured, said that I was his clever darling, and that they were lovely little poems. And he went away singing about Killakilla Mud, which showed that he was happy. An hour later he returned with such velocity of delight that he literally fell into my arms.

'They took them,' he said. 'The editor didn't want to see me . . . said he was in conference or something, but I just followed the office boy and got in, and then he had to look at the poems, and I know they were good, but I could hardly believe it when he said he'd take them . . . ten and six, Joan, look!'

We bought a piece of sausage on the strength of it, and sat together on the edge of the bed and fed each other with our free hands. It was our first really happy time for days; and ever since I have felt very kindly towards the dreadful little poems that stray up and down the literary earth. We decided to rent an unfurnished room somewhere and if possible get our rugs out of pawn and start housekeeping. It would be much cheaper, and, somehow, more homelike.

Clippings had been canvassing lately. You see, when any one produces an undesirable article they advertise for canvassers, which means people to go from house to house and tell the most dreadful lies about it. Clippings was timidly canvassing for Come-Curls Perfect Hair Waver and White Azalea Face Powder, on which he made respectively threepence a bottle and fivepence a box. I had helped him think out the necessary lies and tried to get him to tell them convincingly, but I am afraid that once he got away from me his conscience betrayed him, for he was not successful as a canvasser; although he went really well in the rehearsals we held when Clippings would come to my door and say, 'Good-morning, Madam, I am representing the International Toilet Requisites . . .'

But to-day he showed no signs of wavering as he stuffed his pockets with Come-Curls and White Azalea, in case he might be able to sell some while looking for a room. When he was gone, I sat down to extract more poems from my unwilling interior, and during the next few days I produced quite a lot, sitting in the cold little room, about:

'All day the tropic glare has flamed
On coral strand and lilac sea,
The orchids in the heat have drooped,
Their brown-flecked faces languidly . . .'

and ending with nice rhymes such as 'palms' and 'arms.' And wonderfully, unbelievably, they nearly all sold. So we were able to recover the rugs, and,

when Clippings came in immensely excited about a tiny flat he had found, I limped out with him to see it.

'There's such a pretty tiny woman caretaking,' said he as we halted before 'Alvira Mansions.' 'Mrs. Patson . . . she said her husband would let us in this afternoon.'

Then the door opened to our ring and in the afternoon light we, for the first time, beheld 'Kill-'em' Patson. His mouth keeled tiltingly across his face, and from the up end protruded a cigarette. His nose was flattened and crooked; his chin terrific. He seemed to fill the hall, and he was planted upon his legs as if to resist gales.

'Could — could you show us a flat, please?' asked Clippings, who was always polite; but one felt that no one save a suicide would have addressed Mr. Patson with disrespect. 'If it's not too much bother,' said Clippings.

The flat was a little cramped place, the worst and the cheapest in the big apartment building which clung to the skirts of Darlinghurst and nearly tumbled into Wooloomooloo. It had a wall bed that folded back into a locker, and a gas stove, and minute bathroom. But from its windows you saw the whole sweep of Wooloomooloo and the great wharves and part of the bay, and it ensnared our hearts after looking so long into the concrete light-well. The rent was fifteen shillings a week, so we paid for a month in advance, and with a sense of

future security we moved in with two shillings to spare. But then came days when we were even hungrier than we had been before, and my poems were rejected, and nobody wanted Come-Curls. And even Clippings was dispirited and sat on the edge of the packing-case table with his head in his hands:

'... An' the schoolbooks have the nerve to tell you to do honest work,' said Clippings, kicking the packing-case. 'An' then won't let you get it ... I bet you I've walked a thousand miles last two months ... I'm going to be a socialist ... Jove, Joany, I'd like a roast chicken, wouldn't you?'

There was no use brooding upon chickens, however, and we decided to go for a walk through the sleepy summer dusk; and the fig trees in Hyde Park were black as black, and the city all lilac, with the lighted sky-scraper windows like bits of the afterglow peeping through; and on the warm dusty asphalt pavement we found sixpence! We made quite sure that it was one under a park lamp, and then we kissed each other, and Clippings said that it was a sign that our luck had changed, and we bought a twopenny loaf and some butter, and back in the flat we made toast and feasted. And we both felt that the sixpence had something to do with it when next day Clippings got work!

'Really-truly-pay-day-every-week-work, sweetheart, and we needn't be afraid to burn the bath-

heater now . . . I've got a pound advanced from this week's screw . . .'

When we could afford it, we sent for the dogs and installed them in our small tilted drying-ground where grew one ragged castor-oil bush. It was only about ten-feet-by-twenty, but the dogs could get a splendid view of passing legs through the palings, and doglike they said quite plainly: '*You're* here, so this is heaven — never saw a place like it.'

And they ate a disgusting amount, particularly Tim; and although Clippings would have shared his last bite with them — in common with the rest of creation — he was man enough to mention at times how much more Tim ate than the Stumpy-One. They also accompanied me on my hobbles to and from the hospital, and the Stumpy-Legged-Terrier growled his defiance at tram cars in little gaspy growls, but he was visibly shivered by the traffic, and even his whiskers expressed relief when he reached the safety of the park. Tim, however, who had been born amid the stillness of sunlight somewhere in Central Australia, walked coldly through the skirling busses, plainly announcing that a dog of his years and size was not going to be hurried by them or their likes — not though they ramped as one bus! Occasionally if one passed, as he thought, too close to me, or without showing proper reverence, he rumbled a little, but otherwise he might have been taking a morning stroll

near Lake Eyre. He was a most noble old dog, and than that there can be no higher tribute paid any living thing.

Through some obscure kinship of natures he became very friendly with 'Kill-'em' Patson, the immense skew-nosed caretaker. This cauliflower-eared, carpet-slippered individual was much respected in the neighbourhood, as he had once been Heavy-Weight Champion of Australia; and he certainly looked as though he had only left off being it because he wanted to. One night, when I came in, his small, pertly pretty, henna-headed wife was arguing with a carrier who avowed himself underpaid. 'I won't,' said the carrier shrilly — 'I won't never leave this doorstep here till I gets me rights.'

An immense hunch-shouldered silhouette replaced the small lady in the lighted door, its hands in its pockets, its feet well apart, and it simply regarded the carrier in silence; and in silence the carrier went away.

It was some time until Clippings and I got really used to being admitted to our domicile by Kill-'em Patson, but despite his alarming aspect he was in reality a kindly, slow-footed man patiently trying to follow the vagaries of his wife, who resembled Anita Stewart, and had temperament. She often came to tell me how much she had, and how little Kill-'em understood it. Still, being unused to flat life on the lip of Wooloomooloo, we were startled by frantic screaming at our door in the dead of

night. I opened it and Mrs. Patson fell past me into Clippings's white-pyjamaed arms, where he stood holding a little candle which turned his curls all gold and made him look rather like a cherub.

'Save me!' she wailed. 'He's not a man — he's a *fiend!* . . . Oh, save me!'

Kill-'em Patson rolled ponderously and wearily after her, and Mrs. Patson gave another piercing shriek.

'Come on back to yer room,' said Kill-'em to his spouse; and then to us he added, explanatorily, 'She saw "Trodden Wives" to-night.'

'Devil!' cried Mrs. Patson, who really looked very pretty in her negligee and tumbled curls. 'He has trodden out my heart! . . . He, he even *struck me!*' She draped herself over Clippings and wept snifflingly.

'Didn't,' said Kill-'em advancing. 'Come 'long.'

Mrs Patson darted behind Clippings, who looked as if he would like to have been somewhere else for just a little while, and, extending her small clenched fist, she cried: 'Coward, if I was alone you'd do it again, but Mr. Mackenzie'll defend me.'

Kill-'em Patson towered above Clippings with his chin extended and his mighty arms swinging. His nether eye was completely shut and his mouth twisted.

'It . . . it's so foolish to quarrel,' said Clippings, seemingly from somewhere near the carpet.

'C'mon,' said the pugilist to his wife, 'or I'll have to carry yer.'

The lady clasped Clippings.

'Mr. Mackenzie will never let me go!' said she.

'Oh — er — er — I don't presume to — er — er . . . you won't knock your wife about, will you?' said Clippings, looking up at the monster, and obviously wondering whether he ought to die then and there in the cause of chivalry.

'What she wants,' said her husband, with convincing definiteness if a certain lack of delicacy, 'is a bottom-smacking . . . but I'm not man enough to give it to her.' Then very gently he untangled her from Clippings and bore her shrieking away.

Clippings sat down and mopped his forehead.

'It's a blessing he's such a quiet sort of man — it — it was rather dreadful' (Clippings had a strong sense of propriety) '. . . my feet were bare, and everything.' Then he observed, 'Do you know, Joan, I never sort of noticed *how* big he was before.'

CHAPTER VII

Of a Little Bag of Peaches

We had spent almost a year in our little flat-that-was-the-worst-in-the-building, and although it was not like the island we were very happy. Twice a week we went to a little stuffy picture palace that only charged ninepence, and Clippings jumped and wriggled as he had at the cricket match so long before, and squeezed my hand when no one could see; and on pay-day we rolled up the money for the rent in a piece of paper, and put enough to pay the baker and butcher into a tin box, and then counted what we had left and went out to buy some small piece of furniture that we needed. Sometimes we bought things on the 'lay-by' system, which is peculiar to the shops of the poor and very comforting. You see something that you want and think you haven't the money for, but lo! no matter what its price, you can have it just by paying sixpence! Of course you can't take it away until you've paid the whole lot, but you can go and look at it any time, and know it's yours. Clippings and I were laying by on a round dining-table for quite a long time, and we used to go and see it on Friday nights. Now, too, we went for long walks on Saturday afternoon and Sunday, for my foot had healed at last, although the doctors told me that I should always be lame,

and on these walks we found all sorts of entrancing things: tumbled foreshores towards Darling Harbour where old pinkish-yellow houses hung above a soft blue sea: sandstone steps worn with who knew how many feet? Flower carts unbelievably brilliant in the gold-dusty sunshine of Martin Place: twisted grey streets of Wooloomooloo with some old canted tree rising from the pavement and bare-legged children playing and fighting in its patterned shadow. The harbour, stiff with westerly-caps, glinting and grey and wonderful under the wind . . .

Sometimes, too, we crossed the bay to see the last person in the world that I should ever have expected to go and see of my own accord — Aunt Austace! For she lived now in a tiny water-front flat that she had a great struggle to keep dusted and tidy because she was crippled with rheumatism and New Guinea fever, and quarrelled with every one whom she employed to help her. And, resolute old spirit though she had, the little place was sadly muddlesome, and she was dreadfully angry with nearly every one, and when she invited us to tea there was always something missing; either she had run out of butter or coffee or eggs or tea, and she was very angry about it, too, and she very much disapproved of the way I did things when I tried to tidy her a little. She also asked Clippings hard questions out of the Scriptures, trying to tie him up (but because his grandfather had been one of the pillars of the kirk he was not easily caught, and

whenever he answered correctly she was so disappointed that after a while he had to make blunders on purpose) . . . But for all troubles her lips were held just as tightly as ever and she was just as interested in the Heathen. And yet you can't even be quite sure that you know all about a person who distributes slips of red-and-white calico . . . On Aunt Austace's tiny balcony there lived a fat, very yellow canary bird. One day I asked its name, and a faint red came into Aunt Austace's cheeks, and she said softly, while she arranged the china, 'Her name is Juliet'; then her tone hardened and she added, 'She eats a great deal of seed . . .'

And then one day when we called there was a slim yellow-brown canary in the cage with the fat yellow one.

When we questioned her, Aunt Austace looked a little flushed and excited and oddly, I thought, a little bit ashamed and yet defiant, and she said: 'You would never guess how he came . . .' And then she told us how he had come and sung and sung under her balcony in the dawns to the little yellow canary, and how he had come closer and closer for a whole month, and the little birds had at last touched beaks through the wires, and how, when Aunt Austace opened the door one gold morning, he had fluttered in — and now they were happy all day long . . . And she told the little story very well, and it surprised me somehow, and then she said, with an unmistakable something of defiance: 'Of

course I'm going to call him Romeo.' (When I was sweeping Aunt Austace's balcony on this same visit, I picked up a little paper bag with little holes about as big as a pea cut in it, but I found so many strange things when I swept Aunt Austace's up that I wasn't particularly interested and just gave it to Clippings to take to the garbage can . . .)

And then the most surprising thing of all happened: for on one of our walks about the city the next Saturday we came to a little shop full of birds and puppies and goldfish, and on the sidewalk there was a cage with three canaries in it and they were fluttering and peeping and calling, and as we stood looking at them the owner of the shop came to the door and talked about his pets, and, although I usually hate bird shops and their keepers, he seemed rather a nice old man, and he pointed presently to the canaries in the cage and said: 'It's strange how them little things remembers; one out of that cage was sold last week an' they're lookin' for him . . . they been callin' ever since the old lady took him away — in a paper bag she carried him an' it was funny to hear him cheepin' in it . . .'

I started to ask what the old lady was like, but Clippings said: 'Don't, Joany — it's mean . . .'

And after all, so long as Romeo came, what does it matter if it was in a paper bag or on the winds of dawn?

Ah, we were very happy and Clippings did well at the office, and there was one vivid day when

they added ten shillings a week to his salary, which sounds a lot and yet doesn't seem to go far when you live in a city in a country 'protected from dumping' and have a family of a dog-and-a-half to support. Still it meant that Clippings could have a really good lunch. At first, while we were skimping hard to furnish our little flat and buy cooking utensils and things, he had often only a slice of bread spread with dripping, which he had to eat where the rest of the office staff wouldn't see — in case they laughed. Then some small fellow-clerk told him of a café where they gave you a cup of coffee and a roll and some butter and a piece of cheese, all for a shilling! A place where 'no end of business men' went. They had gone there happily together for quite a long while; and then one day Clippings came home very angry. The proprietors of the café had stopped giving them their little piece of cheese. Of course the lunch was still very nice without it, but the bit of cheese had meant a lot. Later they raised their charge, and Clippings and the little clerk left, and went to a sandwich counter where they didn't get a cup of coffee, but some nice sandwiches for sixpence. Now he could afford 'a really truly lunch with meat and stuff.'

'Joany,' he told me as he was going to sleep, 'I was just thinking about what I'll have to-morrow, and . . . and, don't laugh, but I could just cry about all the poor chaps that can't have anything nice. You see, most chaps are awfully fond of

something nice for lunch,' he explained, as though referring to some peculiar masculine trait.

I lit the candle to look at him after he had gone to sleep. He lay curled up, one arm under his head, the other hand grasping his pyjama tassel — baby-wise! I knew that he would have been ashamed of the unmanly act had he known it, but he didn't. He slept very pink and warm, with a slightly fierce forehead; his curls all gold as they had been on the night he very carefully supported Mrs. Patson. It was not my fault that we were so poor or that Clippings had to work back so many nights a week, or that life is such a steady, unnoticed progression of sacrifice for so many neat small men like him . . . but he so loved good suits and he was always so shabby, and liked bright laughter and games and sunshine, yet came home every night to me in the little cramped flat, and was always so patient and happy, that I felt somehow unworthy, and, kissing his curls, knew that I touched the crown of a hero . . .

About this time I heard that Dickie had sold his selection and taken a small management in the Northern Territory; also, alas, I heard that he was drinking heavily. Had only his baby lived it might have saved him, for a man will usually see his image in his child and find it good no matter what it be.

Life passed uneventfully in our flat, save for occasional stirs caused by Mrs. Patson's tempera-

ment or some flat-ite's husband or lack of husband. We went to see motion pictures that made you think, so their advertisements stated; that made your heart beat, that you'd talk over many times, etc. We also saw 'Into Women's Hearts,' the 'Under-World,' and 'The Flaming Soul of Love.' Clippings made friends with, and brought home for dinner, various drifting human waifs, or little neat clerks that he said were lonely, and Tim rumbled at them with dignified contempt. Then, returning from 'Broken Heart-Strings,' we found the door of 'Alvira' ajar, and the great humped figure of the pugilist huddled disconsolately on his chair. He raised his big crook-nosed face at our questions, and it was pallid and weary.

'What's the matter?' said Clippings, bending over him solicitously.

There was something strangly appealing in the great slouched figure, with its big loose hands hanging beside it. He said in a slow, thick voice: 'My wife's gone . . . Grace has gone.' He looked at us dumbly, and then went on to explain the impossibility of what had occurred. 'I just went for a bit of a look round to the Stadium, and I left her sitting there as natural as could be, and when I came back she's gone and left this note . . . See, it's her writing all right, an' yet afore God she was sitting there just like she always did . . .'

Grace Patson, it appeared, had left for 'the States' with a professional dancer, 'one o' those

dancing women-men,' Kill-'em described him wearily.

'What . . . what are you going to do?' Clippings asked him, pink with sympathy.

The big figure shouldered itself up and slouched across to close the door which we had still left open.

'There aren't nothing to do,' he said in a lifeless voice. 'I suppose you can't wonder at 'im, she was such a *beauterful* woman . . .' He came pathetically back to his starting-point — 'But to 'ave seen 'er sitting there . . .'

Clippings made a cup of coffee and took it through to the big bovine-man, heavily suffering over a loss that he could not understand. She had sat there so calm and pretty on the very verge of such treachery . . . Sad to his implicit faith in her blinding beauty.

They arranged a sweep at the big office where Clippings worked and Clippings came home in high feather having drawn a horse; not a very good horse, but still a horse. The first prize would be five pounds, the second a pound, and the third ten shillings . . . 'And it's to be run on your birthday, Joany, and if we win anything we'll have a really truly party,' he promised joyously; 'and I'll buy a new hat; this one's worn out.' On the morning of the race-day he made out a little list of dainties to be bought — if we won. He also asked me with great seriousness what coloured hat I thought would suit him best. I didn't expect to win any-

thing; Clippings was too happy not to be disappointed. But as two o'clock, the time for running of the Cup, approached, I went and sat at the window that overlooked the pavement, desolate with light rain. The first man I asked was no true Australian, for although the race had been ended for fifteen minutes he didn't know the result. But the next paused courteously, and said, 'Ballacré, Silvia, Norman Gold,' and passed on. I nearly tumbled out of the window, asking him if he was sure, because Ballacré was our horse. After he had gone I decided that there must be a mistake, and I asked another man, with the same result; and thinking of Clippings's hat and our party I choked.

Five pounds! Clippings was very late coming in, and when he did it was as a wobbling mountain of parcels and dripping with rain. He embraced me, parcels and all.

'Oh, Joany, I'm so glad! so glad! I was so afraid there'd be nothing nice for your birthday!'

We held each other for a long while, for we were absurdly happy about our party, and also, through much eating of unpleasant things and small mutual struggles, we had come to love each other very much. So we stood together, all mixed with parcels, and told each other so.

Then Clippings carried them to the table and made me come and undo them: 'All yours, Joany.'

He stood back and waited for my surprise, his eyes very brilliant, looking somehow most gallant

and very charming in his old worn suit. There were flowers, and lollies, and a brown hat that I had admired in a window a week before, and silk stockings, and a new raincoat, and a cake and almonds and raisins.

'Why, Clippings, how could you? . . . you can't have a thing left for yourself!' I said.

He had seated himself on the corner of the table, and looked at me with the peculiarly shining expression of love that I had never seen in any other face.

'You've been so good and so patient with your little foot and everything . . . and all the little discomforts,' said Clippings, who spent his time in admiration of a wife wholly of his mind's creation. 'This time I just wasn't going to be sensible with the money; I was going to give you something you wanted.'

I sat beside him and rubbed my head on his shoulder.

'But your hat, Clippings?'

'No hurry: the old one's a thing of beauty yet,' said he cheerfully. Then he stood up:

'Oh, I knew I'd forgotten something.'

'What?' asked I, but he would not tell me except that it was something I liked awfully much.

'I've seen them in the window for days, Joany, and wished I could buy them for you . . . and you've got to have them . . . only just up at the corner.' So he put on his coat again and the battered hat,

and hurried out into the rain, while I arranged the table . . .

When they took him from under the lorry, he was quite dead, but in one hand he still held a little bag of peaches. The sergeant who came to tell me of what had happened put them on the table.

Clippings had been crossing the wet street on his way back when an old gentleman fell beneath an advancing lorry. The sergeant thought that Clippings jumped in to help him. They were both killed. After the sergeant, very official but kindly, had gone, I sat down at the gay table. It was so unbelievable. So strange that when morning came again everything was just as it always was . . . except that there was no Clippings anywhere in all the world.

PART FOUR

PART FOUR

CHAPTER I

I Find Hope Again

I climbed over the old fence round the Pink Almond Tree, and sat down in the tall soft-bleached grass beside the trunk. The rails shut out all the external world, save the rich hard blue summer sky beyond the little hard dark-green almond leaves . . . I felt tired, tired past all thought; and I had come away to hide for just a little while from all the dear people who were being kind to me. For I was back at home again. My father, immense and snowy-bearded, had marched bashfully into the little flat and, although both of us had all sorts of explanations to make, we never got them explained because we loved each other so the moment we were together again, and he patted my hair with his big clumsy hands and insisted on doing my packing for me as packing was surely never done before . . . my father, who had grown so old being angry with me and waiting for Dickie to come crawling back.

As we were leaving, 'Kill-'em' Patson the pugilist pushed a large flat paper-wrapped parcel into my hands. I found it later to be a picture of himself in warlike attitude and very few clothes, as he had looked, indeed, just prior to getting 'Spunk' Watson in three rounds, but I knew that he meant

it as a token of sympathy. Back at Yallandane they were all so good that I fled at last and climbed in beneath the Pink Almond. You see, my father played draughts with me every evening, and knowing how he hated them I toiled gratefully through endless rubbers. I overheard him confiding to my mother, in one of his stentorian whispers, that games always brightened people up. My mother was a very energetic woman and she agreed that I wanted both brightening and rousing; and so I followed her about her various avocations, being 'roused' until I nearly fell from limping exhaustion. In addition, Billy the Smith wanted my advice about the alterations in the blacksmith's shop, which we both knew that I knew nothing about, and Mrs. Gluber, who detested any one else in her kitchen, asked me to beat cakes for her almost every day . . . I loved them all for it, but I grew steadily tireder, and was affected by strange fits of nausea, until what, with being roused and brightened, and taken out of myself, I lay all of a heap in the grass too tired even for tears . . . It was scented and warm beneath the old tree, and I lay there pretending that I should never have to move again, and watching the wonderful blueness of the far-off sky, and yet wondering with numb pain why I had ever got such joy from the beauty of the world.

Once I heard my mother calling me to go with her and see the new ducklings, but I pressed tighter into the grass, and listened to the calling of doves

. . . calling of Love and Summer! And suddenly I felt again the heat and stillness and excitement of that day when we had sat beneath the fig trees near the great bed of peach-coloured cannas, and the river had been all silver and the farther shore softly blue, and the gold down had shone on Clippings's cheek while he wondered if the men would notice if he kissed me . . . It was poignantly sweet and yet dreamlike as something that had never happened.

Lying hidden beneath my almond tree I tried to make real the little tragi-comedy of our marriage . . . beginning with its six wedding rings and without one kiss. Then our Toy Island, and all the gaiety and brilliance and gleam of the Tropic Coast . . . Burningly bright sea, and tons of rotting oranges in a golden orchard, and white cockatoos feasting and playing; the blacks about their rosy fire on the white sand spit! . . . Then the little cramped life of our flat with its little hungers and skimpings and infinite stretchings of one egg . . . Unreal! Unreal the whole of our life together; unreal my life with Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore even. It seemed to me that I had ceased to live when I left the Grey Country as a child and that all the rest was Dream . . . drifting, changing, colour-of-dream!

Then one thing rose sharply from the brightness of mist; the figure of Clippings: Clippings who had loved me so. I saw him as he had been on the day

that the fierce old gentleman discovered his pipe; with sunburnt nose at the cricket match; Clippings barefooted and elated fishing from the stern of our tubby rowboat, the brilliance of sun upon bright boyish face and hair; Clippings, very neat and threadbare, bringing some little twopennyworth-gift for me . . .

'Oh, Love!' I cried, weeping now into the tall warm grass. 'You loved me more than I loved you at first . . . but not at last, Clippings . . . oh, not at last!'

Such eternal strength of patience in a childish nature, infinite capacity of sacrifice in the face of endless little common demands of life. Great steadfastness of love; love so great that I, who began to care in playfulness of adventure, ended by honouring from my heart. I thought of the little boots so bright on top and worn beneath, and I pressed my face into the grass and felt the ache of loneliness because he-who-had-been-so-readily-pitiful was not here to pity. I caught at the old grey rails feeling the need of something holdable, and felt myself shaken by a terror of loneliness passing words. Gone . . . gone, all things and signs of our life together swept away . . . except only pain. And then very slightly, but with immeasurable portent, something stirred! I sat upright with flaming face and hammering heart, waves of gladness holding me that left my hands fumbling nervelessly at the grass stems . . . One lost meeting love again: the

deserted, given shelter, can have known no greater joy. I leant back into the angle of the rails and panted and trembled, and all the future, that had been so dark, lit up again. It was not the child, but the man that I thought of: still mine, still mine! In warmth and secrecy of love. Later, pain came back again, for it was only his love that he had left me . . . he himself was gone. Also he would have been so joyous, and so dear; being possessed of a quite ridiculously old-fashioned reverence of motherhood, often quite misplaced.

'Joany,' he would say, hesitatingly eager, 'just wait until I help that poor woman with her luggage. She — she looks as though she *ought* to be helped . . .' Dear Babe! In his innocent eyes any woman of but medium plumpness was dowered with the halo of maternity. I often thought what a leap the Census would take were Clippings's expectations realized.

And remembering, softly pain came back to me, for the child is not the lover; but it was not the same desolation of pain. Everything had not been taken from me . . . I lay there in the grass until the blue sky paled and then flushed into gold and the almond leaves were black against it. Then I climbed back over the rails — very carefully; and all the evening air was full of the shimmering of dragon-fly wings, and the world seemed beautiful again, and the night wind almost friendly. I did not tell any one, wanting the knowledge all for my

own for a little while; but my belovéds said that I was better, and went to work on my cheering-up with redoubled energy. Still I had the time before I went to sleep for . . . wondering.

CHAPTER II

Of the Book

The book said, 'The expectant mother must remember that to her is entrusted the possibility of eternal life; of life stretching out into the endless future; . . . and that upon this life or rather chain of lives her thoughts will have immeasurable influence.' I had great faith in the book, and this depressed me terribly. The thought of some thoughts being eternal is dreadful; and even the nice comfortable mixed thoughts that one goes about with every day don't seem worthy somehow. The book realized this, and said that I ought to think beautiful, calm, consecutive thoughts. So far as I could remember, I never had thought any, but I determined to try. The book said that, in an unguarded moment of anger, or grief, or even, I gathered, just plain mixiness, I might do endless harm. This possibility agitated me beyond words. The few moments of my day that weren't vaguely marred by the fear that I had thought all sorts of things that I shouldn't have thought of were darkened by the approach of all the unworthy things that I knew I should think before long. Until you try it you have no idea of how depressing it is going about trying to think worthy thoughts and to 'concentrate upon

the contemplation of lovely things' (about which the book was very strong). It would, I felt, be difficult enough at normal times, but when you have to begin the day upon a rocking earth that is doing its best to simulate a stormy sea voyage, it *is* hard to grasp a post for support and think, 'How beautiful is the sunrise!' I did my best, and hoped that I should improve with practice, but I somehow couldn't feel much of 'the glow of spiritual exultation' with which the book said I ought 'to meet each day of my great task' — at least not when I first met it.

Until I got the book I had enjoyed reading nice sentimental novels, but as they always made me cry, and the book said that this was a 'crime,' I felt very ashamed of the way I had behaved — all unknowingly though it was — and put away all my novels and tried to read 'Sesame and Lilies,' but after two days of it I felt such an irrepressible hatred of the author that I had to put it away, too, although I didn't mind that so much. I had liked to take the car out and sail along the miles of the sunny red roads, but the book said that I should 'travel quietly if possible in an old-fashioned carriage in peaceful enjoyment of the passing landscape.' Because of the book I was also afraid to go rabbit-shooting with my father, having dreadful visions of an infant brooding some homicidal purpose as it sucked its very rattle . . . Indeed, I came sadly to the conclusion that the only thing

I could safely do, apart from thinking beautiful thoughts, was to read the dictionary — it being instructive and certainly not overexciting.

Still, thinking 'beautiful thoughts,' if you do the thing conscientiously, leaves little spare time, and my mental processes became steadily more addled; my thoughts being sharply divided into beautiful thoughts and thoughts I couldn't help — the little vulgar common thoughts. Something like this: Common Thought — 'Wish I hadn't eaten that baked apple yesterday . . .' Beautiful Thought: 'Wild swans against the sunrise; let me think of the wild black swans . . .' Common Thought: 'Expect I'd have felt just as bad if I hadn't eaten it . . . but I'll never eat another.' Beautiful Thought: 'How the dewdrops glisten — quotation from the book — "let me make my mind a mirror to the beauty of God's World."' Common Thought: 'Damn the dewdrops — messy things, anyway; daren't walk through them' (more mournfully); 'give people colds . . . die of pneumonia . . . Kate Adams died of pneumonia . . . poor Kate, she had a red nose . . .' (Don't laugh, one's thoughts are like that when they aren't being ennobled.) It was a bitter struggle, but, oh! I tried.

The book also said that I must 'gather beauty about me,' surround myself with it. So I gathered quantities of flowers for my little iron room every morning and hung a framed photograph of Aphro-

dite of Milos on the wall. I wasn't quite sure whether I ought to have done the latter, for the book said that I must be careful not to think of my baby as either boy or girl (in case it was the opposite and I hurt its feelings, you see), so I hung a companion picture of Apollo on the other wall, just to be on the safe side. The flowers always wilted by noon and hung dejectedly in the fiery midsummer heat, and the red poison-spiders would spin their webs over Apollo, while a hornet stuck her nest somewhere about Aphrodite's tummy. At first I swept them down, but it was very hot, and Queensland insects are very resolute, and I felt always less and less inclined to move; so at last I just lay on the bed and wanted to cry because I'd taken such trouble to gather beauty round me and it was (here I usually gave a little gulp) all *spoilt*, and *useless!* (Another gulp.) I knew, of course, that I shouldn't have gulped, but as the book didn't specifically prohibit it, I gulped quite a lot at one time and another. And I wanted Clippings very much, although I tried not to: you see, Clippings would have been sure to think I was having a baby in a wonderfully smart way — and even if you know you're not, that is such a comfort . . . Still there were happy evenings, and lovely, infinitely still noons that even the book couldn't spoil, and I loved my baby, although I knew that I was failing miserably in my duty towards it.

Some relic of the sentiments of childhood remains with us unaware, I suppose, for in picturing the baby I saw always a small golden-downed, blue-eyed, white-and-rose infant, with the lovely, thoughtful, dreamy look that babies are supposed to have when they think of the wonderful world they have come from. Yes, my vision was more robust than the wispy-golden weeping children I had cried over as a child, but it bore a certain marked resemblance to them. I even thought that, as it grew older, it would hold my hand and walk with me on clear evenings, and I would teach it to think all the beautiful thoughts that I found such a nuisance . . . perhaps because I hadn't been properly managed by my mother. My mother, by the way, said that the book was 'tommynonsense,' and I felt a gentle pity for her and the dreadful ignorance with which she had set about bringing us into the world.

Summer passed, and one day I crept down into the Deep Drain filled by the golden bulrushes, rich with autumn, and I squeezed along beside the hard red bank and came to the small sand-floored bay where I had played when I was little. The bean bush was dead, and its dry brown branches stood out against the richly blue sky, but the sun shone through the stirring warmth of the reeds in all gradations of gold . . . and after I had scratched away the red clay I found my tiny dolls and the yellow china lion still shut in their little rusty

coffee tin! There is something vaguely disturbing in coming suddenly upon that for which you have cared very much, and that now you don't give a rap about — even if it is only a doll.

I held them in the palm of my hand for a while, and then put them carefully back into their tin and hid them again. I felt somehow frightened of the permanence of the earth and the impermanence of the men who master it . . . When I had sat last in the little bay my father's hair and beard had been grey-gold — and now they were as white as milk; and I had never seen Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore, or Cousin Martha, or even Clippings . . . and sitting in the flooding warmth of the old drain, so unchanged while so much had passed, I wondered, as did Purun Bhagat, whither went it all at the long last? And only next week I was going to the little local hospital to bring another life, a life that had never been before, into the uncertain world, and I felt that the responsibility was more than I could bear and was frightened, and rose rather unsteadily and staggered back along the narrow path by the reeds, and saw dimly two henna-and-black butterflies, slightly worn from the past gaiety of summer, wavering over the bright haze of the dying reeds . . . poor butterflies, poor shimmering life! I pushed on, fear driving me against weakness, for I knew now that I should have gone to the little hospital *this* week instead of next . . .

The last sunlight fell softly into the little white-painted iron room where I lay, weakly trying to gather strength enough to ask if the baby was safely there, and all right; and feeling quite convinced that it would be — as a baby — a failure, and that I could never cope with its upbringing, anyway. I was too tired to raise my head, but after a while I could hear Mrs. Gluber and my mother whispering together, and once they laughed. . . . This gave me certain comfort, for assumably being Christian women they wouldn't have laughed about a very frightful baby. There also reached my consciousness a steady but distant wailing and whimpering. Then my mother came in and smiled at me, and asked if I would like to see Baby. I had done my best for that baby and I did feel a faint curiosity about it, although I knew that I should surely drown it the first time I tried to give it a bath . . . Still I wanted to see its innocent golden head, and I nodded feebly . . .

I had heard that maternity often temporarily affected the power of sight, and when Mrs. Gluber held out for my inspection two peculiar purplish-looking little objects I thought quite sincerely I was seeing double.

I said faintly: 'Bring it closer, please . . .'

Then terror seized me . . . both tiny horrors were purple and crinkled, and engaged in pulling unbelievable faces, but — *they weren't pulling them in unison!* As one screwed up its pale eye and

opened its mouth and let its head wobble to the right, the other pursed its mouth preparatory to a fresh effort, contorted its forehead, and let its head fall violently to the left. In place of my frail golden child I had — *twins!* Purple twins, with wisps of long black down that stood up on top of their despairing heads . . . *Two babies to drown in the bath and let fall out of the pram and bring up as I shouldn't!* My courage ebbed. Weeping, I turned my face to the wall, and with unfounded but bitter reproach I cried:

'Oh, Clippings . . . how *could* you!'

CHAPTER III

Of Rose Amelia and Marcus Clippington

They were dear, I decided reflectively, very and decidedly dear; but it had taken me many astonished and shamed months to come to that conclusion. You see, their heads had wobbled so dreadfully at first, and they had been so like a combination of skinned rabbit and fretful beetroot, that somehow I couldn't feel anything but amazement at the sight — and just a faint resentment that two of them arrived when I had invited only one, as it were . . . But now I placed them side by side in the dappled vine-tracery of the sunny verandah and covered them with a small woolly blanket with blue bunnies on it, no bluer than Rose Amelia's eyes, and decided with sudden love-sweetness that they were dear . . . and they were beginning to be different. Rose Amelia — so called after Grandmother Jerington-Whatmore — Rose Amelia was fair and fat, with a definite pink bloom in her round cheeks, and she took her meals with ruminative thoughtfulness, and spent her time in between whiles in slowly raising one foot and then the other, and staring at them with an expression that I tried to think intellectual. Marcus Clippington, on the other hand, was firm and wriggly and brown, and, although he had shed the inky down with which he entered the world,

he still had an inquisitive peak of brown silk on the very top of his head, the back of which was, alas, quite bald from the vigour with which Marcus Clippington rolled it upon his pillow in the effort to miss none of the remarkable things that might be taking place under his very nose, for all he knew; and at times the fact that he could not see directly behind him rent his being with loudly voiced despair.

Instead of waiting with the large-eyed patience of Rose Amelia until the book said that he could have his supper, he cried for it with a desperation of anguish, and then when he got it seemed to feel hurried all the time by the fear that he might be missing something, or disgusted by the fact that the supper wasn't, after all, what he had expected it to be. The tendency to seek new worlds came to him at intervals with disconcerting suddenness and with a small squeal he would endeavour to hurl himself from my restraining arms. Rose Amelia sat in her bath and took a placid interest in the soaping of her plump little tummy, but Marcus Clippington sprang and splashed and shrieked with rage when his mouth tasted nasty after he put the soap into it. There was nothing tractable about him, and his future gave me grave concern; but, on the other hand, he possessed the most entrancing of dimpled and wicked smiles, and no belated butterfly could float across the verandah, and no crimson grape leaf fall but

Marcus Clippington saw it and was duly thrilled. The vision of the Holy Grail would not, I think, have in any degree surprised Rose Amelia, no, nor Saint George's dragon . . .

Bathed and powdered and fed, they lay together under the bunny blanket and watched the sunlight on the crimson grape leaves and old twisted stems; watched them with placid blue eyes and interrogative brown ones, and then, with the odd suddenness of babies, they were both asleep. I kissed them very softly and then called Tim to see them, for he had slightly resented their presence so far, and I wanted to explain to him that I loved him exceedingly, and that of course we both knew babies had very little sense, and for that very reason he must help me to take care of them . . . I explained it all very carefully sitting on the verandah with my arms round him, and I know that he realized the situation perfectly, for he rested his great grizzled head on the bunny blanket and looked at them long and earnestly, with his eyes that began to show the blurring of age. Then he wagged his tail with short thumps against the floor boards, and licked my cheek to show that he accepted our mutual responsibility. Thereafter he lay in the sun near the babies' cot, and rumbled a little bit as he slept, just to show what he would do to any one who hurt them.

I had tried in vain to console Clippings's little terrier. . . .

While we still lived in the little flat he waited anxiously, yet I think with perfect confidence, for Clippings's return. But when we went to leave it he resisted with all his small strength, and as we fastened him into the dog-box of the express he looked out at me with a desperate, reproachful little black face: saying, beyond possibility of misunderstanding: 'Now! when *he* comes back I won't be there — and then what will he think?' During the months that followed he hunted endlessly, restlessly, and, although he sometimes followed me about, he ignored my caresses with passive scorn . . . Oh, he looked everywhere: in the fowl-yards, and duck-houses, way down by the big sand hill, and even as far as the wool shed and drafting-yards . . . I made much of him in a way that sent Tim sulking beneath the pepper trees, but it was useless, and if a car came, or he heard strange voices, he was gone from my arms in a flash, galloping with the little gallop that heaved him up at one end and then at the other. It broke my heart to see him, and yet it was worse when finally he ceased to look . . . Then one morning, although his little whiskered body was still on his chain, we found that he had gone away — as I hoped, to find Clippings for whom he had looked so long on such stumpy legs. I wrapped him in Clippings's old neat coat.

While my objection to work had somewhat decreased with the years, Billy the Blacksmith's

had not, and it at last became so pronounced that even my father, most long-suffering of men, could bear no more. So Billy packed up all his ponderous books and went away; which pained me, for I still liked to sit on the old brown bellows and hear him read of the millennium. But on the twins' first birthday he sent as fine an assortment of iron pigs as could have been found in the length and breadth of the land: and he also mentioned that he had gone back to his wife in Bakingboard, adding a footnote to the effect that some people might be improved by age, but that some weren't.

Then with strange speed the twins' second birthday came, and Billy sent them a tricycle of his own making, which some young Samson might have propelled.

I tried to bring those twins up with the gentle firmness that the book said was so necessary, but whenever it came to the firm part matters were complicated by the fact that I had to get my father out of the way first; he being as wax in their pudgy hands. They fully realized this, and submitted him to a grinding tyranny that made the galley slaves' lot appear, by comparison, as one of riotous freedom.

The book, it must be admitted, recommended the use of 'moral suasion,' but after protracted trial I found that, although the morality might be sound, the suasion was hardly noticeable, and resorted to more old-fashioned methods. Not that

this did much good either, for, whenever well-merited correction did overtake them, they fled clasping the blue seats of their little rompers to seek comfort of their grandfather, where they poured the tale of my brutality into his scandalized ears; Marcus Clippington with the infantine equivalents of bad language, to the accompaniment of leaps and shrieks, and Rose Amelia with lovely clear tears rolling from angelic eyes over round peach-velvet cheeks. Later I would see them going away replete with lollies, one upon either side of their comforter, each clasping an enormous brown hand, while he recited to them some epic of his own childhood, about the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, which contained many stirring passages such as:

'Cold and friendless, all alone,
Now stood poor young Crusoe,
Chilled and sore in every bone,
By the wind that blew so . . .'

or, as the story unfolded:

'One poor prisoner tried to flee,
So would you have done so,
On the shore away ran he,
Never man did run so . . .'

And the twins, keeling along on bangled golden legs, looked up with awed appreciation. He took them for long drives in the rickety Ford which he kept for his personal use, instead of the more expensive tourer, and they slumbered diminutively against his protective sides.

Tim, too, became their abject devotee as the years of their babyhood advanced, and liked to sleep in the sun, making occasional lazy choumps at passing flies, and continually raising his head to see that all was well with his children. Once Marcus Clippington found a big brown snake drinking at the swimming-pool and was busily tickling him with a reed when Tim came. Sensing danger from the manner of the dog, Marcus Clippington shouted lustily for me, but by the time we arrived with guns and hoes Tim was scratching a little dirt over the dead snake. It was good to see the huge old dog sleeping near the twins' bed when, the various devilments of the day completed, they lay in the moonlight like strayed seraphs. There was something so infinitely dependable about his huge grizzled jowl and twitching ears — always on guard — and occasionally opening eye. And if they murmured in their sleep, his tail automatically bumped the floor. Old and lion-like and very venerable, but they tweaked his tail and pulled his great loppy ears with shocking irreverence.

CHAPTER IV

Of My Mother

When the twins were about four years old, my mother spent a week in particularly busy cleaning and tidying and sorting and locking up, and then, as we sat shelling peas by the bright winter fire, she handed me her innumerable key bunches and told me quite simply that she was dying.

The plump green peas ran steadily through her work-blunted fingers and formed a little continually dissolving pyramid in the white basin she held on her knee . . . She explained that she had known it for a long time, but had decided not to go in for the almost certainly useless unpleasantness of operations, and had seen no need to worry us about the matter sooner than need be. Her curly grey hair was neatly netted, her small figure only slightly bowed, but I wondered why I had not noticed before how worn her face was.

She looked up at me and smiled: 'I don't know that I'm so desperately sorry for myself, Joan . . . it is more strange than anything else; and very hard to realize that in a few months, willy-nilly, you're going to put down all your little affairs and messings . . . I still find myself thinking what I'm going to do with next winter's incubator chickens, or the autumn planting of cauliflowers . . . or that

I'll only be away for a little while, and wondering how you will manage until I get back . . . all very absurd . . .' She shelled steadily with a smile almost of satire at her lips. 'As lives go, mine has been a very happy one, I suppose. I've been married to a man I loved, a man in ten thousand; I loved you and Dickie, and latterly the twins. I've been very fond of my home . . . but I don't suppose there's been a day of my married life that I haven't longed for something I hadn't got; perhaps every one does' — a thin flush came into her face, and her eyes brightened.

'When I was young I wanted . . . well, Romance, I suppose you'd call it. Marcus and I loved each other, but it just had to go at that; we really worked in those days, long, long hours, and hardly able to keep awake to get to bed after the washing-up was done. I didn't want the romance of twanging guitars, but I'd like to have been able to wear pretty clothes for him, and . . . and to have had a little time for each other. We never did. And I never had even one pretty dress that I can remember . . .'

She paused again, but I could not see her now, and presently the even, slightly ironic voice went on: 'Not that latterly we couldn't have afforded it . . . but by the time we could — what was the use of putting pretty dresses on an ugly old woman? . . . And, anyway, I didn't want them . . . But I've always wanted to see plays, and hear

songs, and . . . it sounds absurd . . . and to go to hotels and eat lovely meals that you didn't know all about from the minute they were caught and killed and peeled. I didn't want to travel in any intellectual way; I just wanted to poke round the shops and hunt bargains, and see musical comedies. We had planned that we would — once, when we had money enough . . . But Marcus had to save so hard for so long that, although he would have let me do anything if I'd pressed it, he was worried by the notion of expense, and he hated leaving home; and — well — nothing was worth paining him for, so I let it go. The old can't get used to having money unless they've had it always, I suppose. When I *have* spent anything, although I knew quite well that it didn't matter, I've felt a bit myself as though we ought to be putting it by for our old age, and for you . . . even lately when I knew that you would have plenty and that for me there wasn't going to be much more age of any sort . . . Still I wanted things.'

I looked at her with bitter shame. Her days had always passed, for so long as I could remember, in such a steady round of little duties — lamp-filling, washing the separator, feeding the chickens, mating the big white ducks — that it had never even occurred to any of us that she might want something else. If ever she suggested going for a holiday, my father had been so happy in explaining that he didn't see what other people saw in

holidays, and telling us about old Mr. Littleton, whose wife had taken him gallivanting over the Continent of Europe while his sheep were dying of starvation, and they came back very travelled but quite bankrupt, that I think he really forgot what it was that had started his discourse. And although, since I had come home, I had taken up my share of the housework and caring for the garden, I had always thought it quite natural that she should be busy from dawn to dark . . . Now I begged her to let me take her away; we could see theatres and shops and go to concerts. But she shook her head:

'Don't think I'm just being a martyr, and it's very nice of you to want it . . . but I'm simply too tired; and in any case I couldn't leave Marcus. I don't know what will become of him here, when he knows, and he'd be more unhappy away, or left alone . . .' She laughed and then blushed. 'But I'm going to be dissipated. I joined a library last month and ordered lots of pure rubbish . . . that's another thing I've always wanted to do, read lots of stupid, stupid, sentimental books: nothing even the least bit clever . . .' Suddenly she covered her eyes with her hands and her voice broke. '. . . But oh, Joan, how am I ever going to tell him? Oh, how can I tell him? . . .' The tears ran between her fingers and fell among the pea shells; not for herself, but because of an old man's pain. Presently she said:

'We won't do it to-night . . . perhaps to-morrow sometime. And you mustn't tell him a word about the grumble I've had.' She thought deeply, with worn hands knotted in her lap. 'Do you think, Joan, it would be easier for him if he just got used to the idea of my being sick, thinking it was nothing much . . .? Yet that seems so cruel . . . Joan, will *you* tell him?'

I kissed her and promised, for it was little enough; and yet, when he came in that night, wind-blown and ruddy with a muffled twin upon either hand, I did not know how it was to be done.

It was sad and yet very beautiful to see them together in those last months. I found the telling of him easier than I had dreaded; for he simply would not believe: dared not, I think, believe. And who could have tried to convince him? At first he begged, implored her to go away, to seek help of a surgeon, but for the first time in their mutual lives she denied him:

'What would be the use, Joan, of giving him all the anxiety and dreadfulness of operations . . . when we all know how it will end?'

The dear old man promised her innumerable things if she would only get well again soon; new trellises for her vines; modern incubator houses; a giant separator. He used to sit beside her in the evenings and explain the various beauties of these things, his forehead very red with his eagerness, his

white eyebrows bunched, and one hand pushing up his thick white beard . . . Poor darling, all unknowingly offering her more of the things that secretly she had wanted to escape from all her life!

'I'll put up the best poultry pens in Queensland, Annie, as soon as you're about again,' he promised, touching her hand with shy clumsy pats. 'And . . . and would you like a new sink or anything like that?' But he brought her flowers too; the first wild cornflowers and native pansies, and boronia and sandalwood . . . all squeezed together into something that he called a 'bunch.' He, whom the pressure of work had never permitted to make love to her when they were young, made love now with a thousand quivering inflections of voice, and with rough mighty hands made clumsy by years of labour.

My mother would not have a trained nurse, disliking strangers about her, and indeed the nursing was very simple, and she the most uncomplaining of patients; almost always indomitably cool, and faintly humorous in face of persistent pain. Pain the full bitterness of which she never let my father know. Or if her will broke before the irritation of long illness, so pathetically angry with herself, while he who had done nothing but love her reproached himself for his tactlessness in having angered her: 'We must be very careful, Joan; it might make her longer getting well.' Towards the last she lay often under the influence of

morphia, and the old man tiptoed about the room whispering that we must not disturb her, for sleep nearly always meant 'a turn for the better,' and preparing strange beverages against her waking.

Then one morning she died without recovering consciousness while my father was away working among his irrigations . . . I did not hear him come in, and, leaving the room, I met him in the doorway, a bottle in one hand and a cup in the other. He looked at me above his nickel-rimmed glasses and said with a certain pleased earnestness: 'They say that this is very *strengthening* if mixed with milk . . .' I took his little cup of dreadfulness away from him, and led him out into the morning sunshine, very brilliant on his thick white hair.

CHAPTER V

Of the 'Brinell' Cow

Rose Amelia at the age of six was solid and golden and rosy and good; but Marcus Clippington had a mop of dark curls, and a darkly analytical, and eternally questioning, mind.

'What,' he asked, 'what *is* being good?'

I finished brushing his brown tousle of curls, and suggested the simplest way to satisfy his curiosity was to try doing all the things he never had done and thus experience goodness for himself. He put his chubby, horny little hands through his belt and tilted his head to one side. (It may be mentioned that it was certainly not honest toil that had hardened his hands, but the various manual variations of sin; such as felling fruit trees; digging through the banks of irrigation channels to witness the resultant flood; and the periodic dismemberment of automobile engines.)

'There's still *lots* of *naughty* things I haven't done yet, though,' said he, smiling exquisitely. 'Lots and heaps and *tons!*'

I admitted that I quite believed this, although to those who did not realize Marcus Clippington's capability it might seem exaggerated.

'Well,' said he, '*what* is being good, then? How do I *know* when I'm good?'

I said: 'Because I tell you, Marcus.' Then, from sheer weariness falling into platitudes, I added, 'Mother knows best.'

Marcus Clippington, who personified the ageless question mark of youth, corrugated his brow above his snubby nose and asked, 'How do I know that she doesn't only *think* she does?'

Rose Amelia, smoothing her own flaxen bob before the glass, now remarked in her peculiarly good and mature manner:

'You shouldn't worry Mother, Malcus Frippington: we must *'spect* our parwents.' (Rose Amelia was a devout student of the pious Mrs. Gluber, and garnered many of her choicest precepts from that source.)

'I won't 'spect 'em 'less I want to,' said Marcus; then in his gruffest and most masculine tone he asked, 'Can I draw my five bob, Mum?'

'He wants to give it to a dirty framp, Mummy,' said Rose Amelia with placid disapproval.

The red surged into my son's brown cheeks and he advanced on Rose Amelia with clenched fists.

'He's *not* a dirty tramp,' shouted Marcus Clippington. 'Do you hear! You silly long-eared rabbit Rosy! And don't you talk like that!' He planted himself before her with spread legs and shut hands.

Tears welled into Rose Amelia's lovely eyes and rolled over her velvet cheeks, while her red mouth quivered.

'Malcus Frippington is being very rude to me, Mummy,' she protested in her small refined voice. 'And he pulled my *hair* yesedy . . .' Self-pity overcame her.

'He's a nice old man, that has no warm clothes,' said Marcus Clippington.

Rose Amelia raised a face like a dishevelled carnation. 'He is a dirty framp, Mummy. Mrs. Guber said so . . .' she gulped. 'An' Malcus Frippington put his tongue out at me last night.'

'You told me all about that before,' I said, sometimes finding the numerous insults heaped upon Rose Amelia slightly wearisome. 'But still it was very rude of him, and he mustn't speak to you as he did just now — no gentleman would . . . But, Rose Amelia, it isn't nice either to talk about poor old men as "dirty tramps."'

'I told her so,' said Marcus Clippington scornfully. 'Only she's too 'ceited to listen.'

I ignored this and went on with my maternal address:

'Mummy wouldn't advise you to go giving away your money to any one who asks for it, though, because most of them will only drink it when they get to the next town.'

'*This* one wouldn't,' said Marcus doggedly. 'An' he's *terrible* cold in the mornings, he was all *shivery* . . .'

'Mrs. Guber says it's the lerius tantrums that made him shiver,' said Rose Amelia. 'I wouldn't

give him any of my money that's in the tin pig.'

''Course you wouldn't, you're too greedy,' said her brother, 'but I want my five shillings.'

'I don't think you can have it,' I said firmly.

He caught my hand between his little hard ones. 'Please, Mummy, oh, please! He's such a *poor* old man . . . He's got nothing but a shirt and trousers, and *they're* all torn . . .' He released my hand and explained earnestly upon his middle fingers — Clippings's gesture! I gave him his five shillings and he went whooping away; little eager generous heart; he had been saving the money for a new popgun!

'Mrs. Guber says Malcus Frippington will come to a bad end, Mummy,' said Rose Amelia gravely.

I kissed her, for she was the goodest of little daughters, and it was no fault of hers that Mrs. Gluber was a stern Lutheran German who couldn't recognize a noble soul just because it went about to the accompaniment of loud, piercing noises, brandishing a tommyhawk, and tore the seats of its rompers sliding down roofs.

When Rose Amelia, wearing a short rose-pink floresco dress, with small rosy bloomers to match, had gone dutifully away for her morning walk with her grandfather, I went out and leant against the great twisted grapevine stems, just touched with the beauty of velvet buds. The big pepper trees were draped with shining new leaves; little yellow butterflies danced in the clear spring sun-

light, and all the air was magical with the scent of the first orange flowers . . . and very soon the Pink Almond Tree would be in blossom.

Since my mother's death, my father had almost given up going out on the run. He seemed suddenly to have become a very, very old man, and he sat much in the sun and slept, or wrote a little at a book that he was preparing on the scientific removal of lambs' tails, and fed the fowls, and walked with the twins, while together they dramatized the poetic version of Robinson Crusoe:

'As the ship was sailing fast,
Storm-clouds did enshroud her,
Loud and stormy grew the blast,
Louder still and louder . . .'

My father was usually the ship, and Marcus Clippington the stormy blast — for which he had a strong natural aptitude; but Rose Amelia did not appear until they reached the stanza wherein the ship:

'. . . ran on a rocky island,
And poor Crusoe all alone,
Swam and reached the dry-land' —

where Rose Amelia, seated solidly in the grass, personated the isle.

Altogether the performance was a great success, Marcus Clippington being as it progressed Robinson Crusoe, Man Friday, the cannibals, the wild goats, and at last the rescuing sailors. He was certainly the star of the piece, but it did seem to me

that he dealt rather meanly with his supporting cast, leaving them only the parts of parrot (rendered by Rose Amelia) and the stockade (portrayed by my father and a gum sapling), while Tim, when he could be kept awake, played the faithful dog with great dignity. He had, you see, become very fat of late, and slept in the sun and dreamed of old exploits, and bumped his tail when some member of his family passed, smiling with great tooth-worn jaws. But he still loved to ride beside me in the car when I went about the run, and to see the setting of the traps . . . We were very busy on these trips, for I struggled, with very moderate success, to take my father's place, leaving the running of the house to Mrs. Gluber and her two maids. Often I took the twins along, and then they had to ride in the back . . . One of my neighbours meeting us said that she did not know how 'a true mother' could prefer having a great dog beside her to her own children; I did not try to explain, for women who talk about 'true mothers' are not the sort of women who ever do understand things. But the twins could fight just as happily in the tonneau; and after Tim had loved me so, and helped me bring them up from the time they were little, I wasn't going to put him out of his favourite seat when he was grey-headed. If my father came, the old dog gave up the seat of his own accord, for thus it had always been since the world was young, and he understood it.

We had our very happy hours: hours found in the midst of work for the most part; the gifts of the Grey Country to those who love her . . . An evening when driving across the edge of the Northern Spinneys we came on a great lily flat at the height of its bloom; tens of hundreds of big white spider-stars, born in clusters on their tall thick green stems, and massed and tangled and interwoven into a glimmering resplendently patterned flower-lace, clear and cool and exquisitely sweet under the clear, far rose of the sky . . . Or shy grey kangaroos, staring at us from the grey of the little half-dead trees, or drinking gracefully at some purple-grassed bore drain edge . . . A night when across the flaming splendour of a sunset swamp we saw an immeasurably lovely, lightly floating pattern of black swans . . . Times when we paused to lie on some sun-warm culvert made of an old hollow log, and watched the busy drain-life in the shallow water beneath us; the nobby and feathered waterweeds, the hurrying beetles with the little silver bubbles on their tails, and the flash of the tiny fish that get into the channels of artesian water almost as soon as they are made, even though there is no other water within hundreds of miles; get there no one knows quite how and flourish exceedingly; while all the old bushmen say that they come up out of the bores, regardless of the fact that if they did they would undoubtedly come up boiled.

We had also little glimpses of Rose Amelia, who was an ornament wherever she happened to be; Rose Amelia gravely dancing, or doing her dolls' washing with housewifely care, her eyes blue as the blue ginghams, and the pink florescos no brighter than her cheeks; her small sunbonnets giving her a certain old-world charm . . .

Yes, there were very happy hours, but there were many more of worries small and big. Worries because I knew that the percentage of lambs ought to be much higher than it was, and didn't quite know how to reason with the ewes about it; because the contractors working on the subdivision fences were cutting crooked posts, and when I protested they only argued interminably, and spoke of the danger of 'bendee posts,' and 'hollow heart posts,' and 'limb posts,' all of which I knew nothing about and couldn't contradict. And the old men kangaroos on Yallandane would quarrel with the old men kangaroos on the adjoining properties and tear great holes in the dog-fence in the process, and leave the holes well smeared with blood so as to make sure of a passing dingo noticing them, and coming through to see what it was all about . . . Endless arguments with my own men . . . I leant on the grapevines and felt harassed, and hoped I wasn't ruining the whole place, and wondered what my next overseer would be like, and how long it would be before he decided to take up a place of his own if he was good; that his wife

didn't like the life if he was just mediocre; or that he 'was too much of a man' to take instruction from a woman.

My life seemed to me to pass in a succession of overseers; overseers who were nice hard-working fellows, but wouldn't oversee, or who bullied and lost me my best stockmen; overseers who wouldn't lay poison for the dingoes for fear of getting their own dogs; or who persisted in cutting off my lambs' tails inches shorter than I knew lambs' tails ought to be cut . . . Overseers whom I had flattered and wheedled, and been coldly dignified or just natural with, but all of whom had utterly disregarded what I wanted, and finally left me, or had to be dismissed at a most awkward time.

Had we been wealthy enough to pay a manager and build a separate home for him, it would have been all right, but we weren't. Had there been only myself and the twins to consider, I should have sold the place in despair, for all my love. But how could I sell when my father was so proud of it, although he never went out now, and was always showing the admiring twins where he had built his first bark humpy; and when he took such delight in keeping the fowl runs and garden just as my mother used to have them . . . ?

Presently I saw the yard boy coming. He was the dirtiest yard boy I have ever seen, but, on the other hand, he was less ferocious than the majority of the order, and I forgave him. He was, however,

talkative. (All my staff talked immoderately except when they were indignant.) There is nothing of the forelock-pulling retainer about an Australian yard boy. This one said, with a cheerful grin, his cap still on his head: 'Th' brinell cow 'as gone.' As the 'brinell' was the only member of our milking herd that had at times been known to give noticeable milk, I was duly appalled by the news.

'Not,' I cried, 'the brindle?'

'Clean as a whistle,' said my henchman. 'I see her last chewing the cud under the iron bark by the big gate just after I milked last night; an' I said to 'Arry Adams, "That's the ole brinell 'at Mrs. Mackenzie bought off Smith, she's 'ad three calves since she come 'ere and not one 'eifer!" 'Arry Adams was smokin' 'is pipe as I said it to 'im and then we come right on up . . .'

'Yes,' I said, 'yes, but where can she have gone to?'

'. . . We come right on up to the meat 'ouse, and 'Arry was tellin' me that 'e can't keep 'is farm on the Darlin' Downs much longer.' (Harry Adams, be it explained, had for many years been in the painful position of most farmers on that area which we describe in our publicity pamphlets as 'the richest farmland in the world,' in that he had literally to *keep* his farm — by hard work in another part of the country. So far he had been successful, but according to my yard boy he saw the time of parting ahead.) '. . . 'E reckons it's about got 'im

down and out, and 'e's going to sell 'is milkers . . .'

This was more relevant than most of the yard boy's verbal wanderings, but I tried again to stem the flood.

'Can she have stuck in one of the fences?'

'Maybe she 'as . . . 'Arry said . . .'

'Well, you'd better go and look for her,' said I.

The yard boy grinned amicably, and scratched his ear:

'Think so?' he asked cheerfully. ''Arry reckons he can't sell 'is farm, for whenever 'e gets a buyer up all the other farmers around runs to 'im trying to sell *their* farms, and frightens 'im away . . .'

'We must,' I said, 'find that cow.'

A small hand plucked at my arm, and, turning, I beheld my son; for once in his life he was pale and his eyes big with fright.

'Hasn't the brindle cow come home?' he asked in a reedy voice, 'Because . . . well, because yesterday I took Gran'pa's rifle when he wasn't looking and went out for a little bit, and I shot at a rabbit and — and the old brindle cow was *'way*, *'way* over beyond, but . . .' his voice almost failed . . . 'but she sort of jum-ped in the air, and then went away, bellowing and sort of *jumpy-like*, and she jumped over the irrigation fence . . . but I hoped she was just a bit *scared*-like.'

No such hope rose in my breast, for she was a cow of mature years and sound judgment.

CHAPTER VI

I Sit Down and Weep

There is something narcotic in the march of days where every day is so exceedingly like every other: the clear dawn seen across the eastern irrigations and little mulgas; the increasing heat, rising to the climax of blue noon; red-stained clarity of evening, when the dragon-flies shimmered in their myriads above the purple-seeded couch-grass; and the old iron windmill, with the little lacelike dead mulga at its foot, stood sharply black against the sky . . . There were, of course, days of grey cloud, when the wind went sighing through the foam-grey mulga seas, and all the irrigation channels turned leaden and sad; and days when the storms rolled and slashed; and sharp winter days of frost. But these were only as drops poured into the great stillness of the sunlit weather that lies year in year out over the Grey Country. Much the same beautiful indifference of light falls on the land when it is sleekly silvern and flower-patterned with plenty, and upon a world shrunken with drought and the dry-rot of death . . .

All through the recent winter we had watched the sheep slowly growing weaker, until they died where they had slept, or fell prey to the carrion crows and the big cowardly eagles, who can, when

they like, kill kangaroo, but much prefer lamb or dying ewe. For three months the sheep had been fed on scrub and a patent salt that said it did them so much good that one was frightened to do without it; and when the lambs were born there was hardly any milk for them, and they had to learn to eat mulga when their little tummies weren't even ready for grass . . .

With the spring rain came, but not before Queensland had lost six million sheep, of which five thousand were ours. Then with the green feed came the flies . . . I sighed at times for the indomitable and long-vanished soul of Captain Dashaway, who could doubtless have handled the problems which met me without a tremor. And I thought rather bitterly of Jerry who, rumour had it, was waxing rich and went at intervals to Africa hunting lions: to hunt lions implies a certain enviable freedom of spirit . . .

Still even worry loses something of its edge when you have worried over just the same things on clear fierce days that are just alike, through years that flow softly the one into the other, and are all sun-flooded, floored by the red dust, and walled by little hard grey trees.

I worried less than I had at first, and was slightly less economical. But my only real extravagance was the purchase of some good milkers. The untimely decease of the 'Brinell' rendered it almost imperative, and yet, as pretty well every station in

the West contents itself with several dozen wiry toughened beasts, who give about a pint of milk each, I felt that in sending for milking cows from the Downs I was doing a rather wild thing, smacking in fact of one of those pleasures which lead precipitately to the Bankruptcy Court.

I hesitated long, but the sale of Harry Adams's milking herd proved my undoing, for Harry was immense, with long, drooping, pointed, brown whiskers, and he looked rather like a walrus graced by spiritual leanings (a presence which automatically inspired confidence). Also he had worked for me for some twelve months, and in one way and another I had been good to him . . . Anyway, I trusted him and decided to buy the cows on his recommendation. They were twenty in number and their price a hundred pounds, and Harry told me that they simply flowed with milk, which formed into rich yellow cream almost before it reached the bucket. He did mention that they were at the time in poor condition, but as almost everything in Queensland was in like state, there was nothing against them on that score. Harry went down to his farm specially to get them; for he said that they were worth taking a bit of trouble with, and that he, Harry, meant to take it. When he got home, he found that his wife needed him and he couldn't come back — and the first germ of disquieting doubt was sown in my breast . . . Still I made arrangements that the cows be carefully

milked when they left the train, and again on the way out, and got a skilled stockman to bring them.

They came in the bright morning, and we went forth to meet them, if not exactly with timbrels and song, at least with beautiful anticipation . . . They came slowly as befits the venerable; their eyes were dull; their ribs prominent; on their horns showed the wrinkles of years; and their united ages would, I felt sure, have run into two centuries. By their side I was a child . . . And looking at them I fully realized that Harry had taken trouble; also that from his standpoint it had been worth while. No one farm could have yielded them. Said the stockman in charge: 'It's a real credit to Harry that he could get 'em in the time — it would 'uv taken most folks months . . .' Then, seeing my face, I think he was sorry, for he added, 'Still you can't tell, Mrs. Mackenzie, sometimes it's the most *remarkablest*-looking cows that gives the most milk.'

I was grateful to him, but it did not prove to be the case with my cows.

Some months later the yard boy came to me with the announcement that another of the 'new 'uns' had a calf.

'I think she'll be a good 'un,' he said brightly. 'She's got one tit that's real good.' There was nothing of sarcasm about the yard boy; he was genuinely optimistic.

Tim came with us on the walk to meet the cows,

and when we returned to the house he seemed distressed and lay panting heavily in the pepper shade. I brought him a basin of water, but he would not drink, and finally, feeling troubled about him and depressed by Harry's treachery (which was perhaps condoned by the fact that he had a farm to support), I sat down near the old dog. His breathing grew easier at last, and he seemed to sleep for a while. Then he scrambled agitatedly to his feet, stumbled to me, and rested his head in my lap, whimpering. I shook his great shoulders and asked him what was the matter. He looked up at me with old bleared eyes, whined softly, tried to lick my hands, and then very swiftly he was dead.

I had dreaded this time so much as he grew old, so often imagined it, that for a long while, sitting under the cool green cavern of the pepper tree, I could not believe that it had really happened . . . He lay just as he had lain a thousand times in life, big grey head pillowed on immense forepaws, and I couldn't help expecting him to wake up and snap lazily at a passing fly . . . Then I ran my hand down the short firm closeness of his coat, and realized that it meant nothing to him. We had loved each other for such a long time; and now there was nothing that either could do for the other . . .

It seemed to me that of loving there came at the last only one thing: pain. Where were they all whom I had loved? Imperious old lady, boy-lover,

mother . . . and splendid dog; gone . . . who knew whither? But from my ken utterly. Jerry gone, my father playing with little children in the sun. Dickie-of-the-valiant-heart estranged from us, self-ruined . . . or, no, ruined by the cruelty of Life. And for the first time I hated Life, which is different from and blacker than pain . . . and for solace what was there save the opiate of the marching days?

But I couldn't take up the thread-of-days in the weeks that followed Tim's death, and one morning I left all that I should have done and went out through the sunshine along the mail road that ran past the irrigations. Leaving them behind, I went on and on a long way, limping through the noon-heat. The mulga was particularly dead down the mail road; grey skeleton trees shedding withered strips and slivers of bark . . . Awhile ago, after the spring rain, the herbage beneath them had been green, and starred with mauve daisies, and native pansy, and deep blue crow's-foot eyes: but now the spring was past, and the flower carpet withering back to grey. The road, brick-red, blazing in the sun, ran on beneath a sky of vividly deep blue . . . and I tramped along it and hated the world, and tramped only to make the hating less painful. Then, coming to an old brush fence, I sat down on its grey logs and rested against the gatepost. The sun was terrifically hot, but I was glad of it, for I felt cold . . . Presently I saw that against the grey

gatepost grew a big bush of golden everlastings, their leaves slightly withered by the heat, but the hard-shining, golden-brown flowers standing defiantly bright.

While I watched, a butterfly, hennaed-orange, veined and bordered with black, came and settled on the lemon-gold cushion of an everlasting centre: flowers and insect a live-gold patterning against the grey fence . . . And although I didn't want to, I thought how beautiful they were, and then wanted some one to show them to, and realized that I did not hate the world, but that I was desperately lonely. For even if one loves very much two little children, and an old, old man who plays with them in the sun, one can be lonely, and I was hurt because Harry had cheated me over the cows, and I wanted Tim. So I leant against the gatepost and wept; for the first time for a long while . . .

The grey mulgas were growing rosy with evening when I went home to take up the little narcotic march of days again. But I felt happier than I had: for one can get used to being lonely, but not to hating Life. I even passed a knock-kneed, melancholy cow, without bitterness of spirit.

CHAPTER VII

The Singing Gold

Jerry returned from a lion hunt and came to see us. A much older Jerry, with the smile lines deeply sunken in a face yellowed by life in the tropics; crinkled crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes, and hair quite silver. I had been glad at the thought of his coming, but when he came, with the old quirk of laughter at his lips, and told my father and the enraptured twins of lions and thorn bushes and Kaffir kraals, and snow-capped mountains on the line of the Equator, I felt suddenly very angry with Jerry, and treated him with great coldness. He laughed and cleaned my car engine for me; although I told him that I would prefer to send it to the local garage; he improved the sluices on the irrigation channels, and played the cannibals in Robinson Crusoe as they had never been played before. Then one day as I walked across the bright morning irrigations towards the bore, he climbed out of a water cutting and fell into step beside me; very muddy, with a curved drain rake on his shoulder. He said: 'I got three lions last trip, Joan, whoppers . . . but one nearly got me, think of that!'

I said nothing and tried not to limp too noticeably: a limp somehow invites sympathy whether you want it or not.

Jerry said: 'Little Comrade, you are a bit glad to see me?'

And I felt more angry than ever with Jerry; but having reached the steaming, frothing thunder of the bore, we sat down on one of the weathered sluice-logs, disturbing the red-and-blue dragon-flies. I knew now that I was angry with Jerry, now that he had come, because I had always expected him to come; and he had taken a very long time. I think he understood this, for he launched into a protracted explanation of why he hadn't come, although he had wanted to: which I didn't find particularly convincing, for there was nothing to have stopped him. And I felt so angry that I almost wept; which would have been humiliating . . .

There was a fresh strong wind blowing, and it whirled away the little clouds of sunny steam; and presently a little grey bird came and tilted and fluttered in the air above our heads.

When Jerry had done explaining, I explained to Jerry that if he had cared he would have come before; but he said that if he hadn't he wouldn't have come at all . . . Which made me angrier still.

Then I looked up and saw that the little bird had tilted away down the wind, and was gone . . . And I realized that a lot of things went as the bird; and that, although I had expected him to come, I hadn't really suffered so desperately as I had begun to think when I grew angry with Jerry . . .

That perhaps I had not thought so very much about him for a long time; but that it was good to have him there again. Whereat I smiled and told him not to bother explaining any more.

Later I said: 'But, Jerry — the twins —' For although Jerry was used to lions he didn't know what it meant to have Marcus Clippington about the place . . .

Jerry looked much as he had on that first morning when he took the thorn from my foot:

'There is,' said Jerry, 'no need to worry about their approval. In fact, I proposed to them this morning, and after proper consideration they accepted me with acclaim . . . could hardly bear the thought of even a brief separation, poor lambs. If they hadn't been locked in the tool house I could never have left them . . . They had their revenge, though; wouldn't tell me where you'd gone and I've humped this rake all over the irrigations . . .'

I remarked that he would have to rebuild the tool house if Marcus Clippington destroyed it, as he almost undoubtedly would, and then we sat on the old log in the rising steam-clouds sharp with the smell of artesian water, and, looking at each other, were happy. Quite absurdly so.

Jerry was selling his property in the Gulf, but he wanted me to see it, and we planned to motor there for our honeymoon. My father said — his cheeks, which had grown very pink and clear, bunching above his milky beard — that he would

like to come with us and hear the down larks again. I was glad, for if any one deserved to hear larks he did. But the twins I meant to leave for a few weeks with Mrs. Gluber, who, supported by the doctrines of Luther, seemed able to manage them . . . They wept: dark stormy booing from Marcus Clippington, who cried only when riven to the heart, and flower-dewed weeping of Rose Amelia.

It was a moving spectacle, but there seemed to me to be something unusual, even distinctly incorrect in twins on a honeymoon. Also Marcus Clippington, though very dear, could be depended upon to destroy the poetry of any situation. Jerry, however, was, like my father, clay in their pudgy hands, and my father himself said he wouldn't really enjoy it (our honeymoon) without them . . . So they came.

And one night we camped on a gold immensity of down under a gold immensity of evening, and all the plains were sweet with the singing of the Australian larks. They rose flutteringly from near at hand, and hung like little dark, quivering specks against the distance . . . My father watched them very eagerly, and then I saw trouble rise in his face, for he had grown too deaf to hear them any more; and I was angry with myself for not having thought of it. He went and busied himself about the making of a little fire, trying to hide his disappointment from us, his hair and beard all gold with sunset. But presently the twins ran to help him,

and he grew interested in showing them the right way to start a fire when there were no small twigs about . . . Jerry and I walked away through the soft short grass, disturbing the little insect life; and the soft warm grass smell made us sneeze . . .

Looking back, I said: 'What a long way we have come!'

And Jerry laughed and the last sunlight shone on his grey hair.

'Quite a ridiculously long way from a flowering almond tree,' he said. 'Joan, I don't know why the devil I *didn't* come before; I've never been really happy without you . . . You are glad I came, Little Comrade?' I took his hand and we walked on together.

Presently he said: 'It's queer how certain phrases catch your fancy, Joan . . . Do you remember when your father first told us about the Singing Gold? Well, in some odd, jumbled way it came to symbolize to me the happiness of life. I wanted always to find it and I never could — without you . . . But we have now; together. Listen!'

Suddenly, from far away, and blessedly muffled by distance, came the weeping of Marcus Clippington (who had perhaps ventured a chubby hand too close to the seducing camp-fire) . . . But from overhead, from all about, from farthest range of sound, came the singing of larks. And I, too, knew that we had found the Singing Gold of Joy. For I loved Jerry; had loved him almost all my life . . . And

yet, even in the gold sunset and the great song of larks, with a much-loved arm on one's shoulders, there may be ghosts about; little joyous ghosts that dangle cotton reels and bounce on stumpy legs . . . the little sad-sweet ghosts of memory.

THE END

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THE SINGING GOLD

DOROTHY COTTRELL

DOROTHY COTTRELL

author of 'The Singing Gold,' lives on a sheep-ranch in Australia, where she was born twenty-five years ago. She spends most of her time in a wheel-chair, which she regards as a nuisance, although it gives her plenty of opportunity for writing. Since she is proficient with an automobile, she often takes her lunch and typewriter with her, and drives off for the day to find quiet in the depths of the mulga scrub. 'A car,' she says, 'is perhaps the most delightful thing in a delightful world.'

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